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LOVE IN A PALACE

BOOKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR

**HISTORY OF FORT ST. GEORGE, MADRAS
ON THE COROMANDEL COAST**

THE NAUTCH GIRL

THE FOREST OFFICER

A MIXED MARRIAGE

THE SANYASI

DILYS

CASTE AND CREED

THE TEA-PLANTER

THE INEVITABLE LAW

DARK CORNERS

THE UNLUCKY MARK

SACRIFICE

THE RAJAH

THE MALABAR MAGICIAN

THE OUTCASTE

LOVE IN THE HILLS

LOVE IN A PALACE

BY

F. E. PENNY

AUTHOR OF

"THE INEVITABLE LAW," "THE OUTCASTE," ETC.



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CHARACTERS

CAPTAIN HASSAN UD DEEN .	A.D.C. and Private Secretary to H.H. the Nizam.
THE NAWAB CASSIM UD DEEN	A Hyderabad Noble and Father of Hassan.
THE BEGUM	Wife of the Nawab and Mother of Hassan.
YASIN	The Nawab's Second Son.
FAZEELA	Yasin's Mother.
THE SAHIB MURAD UD DEEN	The Nawab's Brother.
KENNETH DERWENT . . .	Assistant Resident at Hyderabad.
COLONEL AND MRS. ORBAN .	
DELIA	Their Daughter.
MAJOR AND MRS. ROXHAM .	
LORD RIVENHALL (and others)	

Scene : A Palace at Hyderabad, Deccan.

IN A LATTICED BALCONY

How shall I feed thee, Beloved ?
On golden-red honey and fruit.

How shall I please thee, Beloved ?
With th' voice of the cymbal and lute.

How shall I garland thy tresses ?
With pearls from the jessamine close.

How shall I perfume thy fingers ?
With th' soul of the keora and rose.

How shall I deck thee, O Dearest ?
In hues of the peacock and dove.

How shall I woo thee, O Dearest ?
With the delicate silence of love.

“SONGS OF MY CITY”—By Sarojini Naidu

LOVE IN A PALACE

CHAPTER I

THE Bay had come in for its full meed of abuse from the passengers of the P. & O. *Aurungabad*. The weather had been pronounced "disgusting." A few of the more fortunate, who for some unknown reason proved immune from sea-sickness, occupied their seats in the saloon with unimpaired appetites ; but there were many gaps where the fixed revolving chairs stood empty.

Colonel Orban was one of those in luck. He had secured a table for himself and his party at starting, and had never been absent from it. It was a small table with seven seats, three on each side and one at the end.

After passing Lisbon the weather improved. The squalls died down ; the clouds cleared away and the sun shone out with all the brilliance of the month of October. The sea lost its grey tone and spread itself in sheets of limpid blue streaked with gleams of light.

Mrs. Orban and her two daughters appeared on deck with a crowd of other invalids on the fifth day out from London ; and the saloon filled up with a number of hungry people, all ready to make up for lost time in the matter of conversation as well as food.

Colonel Orban took the head of his table. On his right was his wife. Next to her sat Kenneth Derwent, a friend ; and beyond him Delia Orban, the Colonel's

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younger daughter. On his left he had Captain Bonchester, an officer in the Indian Army, Kate, his married daughter, and Major Gerald Roxham, her husband. They were a congenial party, the envy of those who happened to be travelling by themselves and who were solitary items in that isolated world contained within the steel walls of the *Aurungabad*. Although the Orban party spoke in subdued tones it was evident that good humour and enjoyment of life were to be found among them in no small degree. Delia, called Dell by her intimate friends, had never been out of England since she had been brought home by her mother as a child of four. Everything was fresh to her eyes. She was enjoying each moment of the day now that she had gained her sea-legs. She loved the early morning tramp on deck before breakfast with her father, who was under the comfortable impression that he was performing a highly meritorious parental duty in giving her exercise. He took credit to himself for the excellent appetite she showed at breakfast. "That's the effect of the constitutional," he said to his wife; who smiled under the conviction that her daughter would have skipped just as readily down the companion stairs before the trumpet had ended its call, had it been sounded before the matutinal tramp instead of afterwards.

After breakfast Dell and Kate went up on deck where the chairs of the party were grouped in a semi-circle. It was rather an exclusive group, complete in itself and holding out no invitation to the stranger. Colonel Orban's chair flanked the semicircle, standing at its most vulnerable point with an inhospitable shoulder presented to the public.

Without intending to be in any way impolite he assumed the attitude proverbial of the Englishman in his castle, an unconscious attitude common to many Englishmen when they travel with their womenkind. It was the result of the conviction that it would be better for all parties if no intimacy was permitted until

it was ascertained that the strangers were desirable individuals. In Colonel Orban's opinion, care observed in the beginning of acquaintance prevented complications afterwards. It avoided the unpleasant necessity of backing out of a hasty friendship which might be found later on to be undesirable. Naturally a polite man, his British insularity often put a severe strain on his courtesy.

Dell's eyes as she sat on deck often wandered away from her needle or book to watch the groups and pairs about her. She caught sentences here and there that roused her curiosity and provoked a longing to join in the conversation. Cricket at Lord's, polo at Hurlingham, tennis at Wimbledon awoke memories and brought back visions. Now and then it happened that she had actually been present at the very event that was under discussion ; and being sociably inclined she longed to join in, ask questions and give her own experiences. Sometimes a voice attracted her, or a low laugh in which the mirth was infectious. She knew her father's disposition too well to care to take the initiative and step out of that ringed fence of chairs. So she gave no sign of what was passing in her mind, but just listened and longed. Sometimes her eye sought Kate's. She too was gazing over the top of her book, her attention wandering far beyond the bulwarks of the ship. In fancy Mrs. Roxham was back in a familiar nursery where little voices filled alien ears paid to listen ; and Dell found no response to her mute appeal for sympathy.

Mrs. Orban glanced from one daughter to the other, divining their thoughts, her heart aching for the elder one as she recalled her own past experience. The Colonel's wife was inclined to be silent ; yet there were moments when she not only made her voice heard but also her will to be felt. It was not often that she took a lead ; but when she did, it was with a quiet determination that her husband found impossible to resist.

Kate was inclined to be like her mother, a woman of few words. She had a great dislike to anything of the nature of a dispute; and even shrank from discussion if it was likely to become at all warm. In Gerald Roxham she had a husband after her own heart. An excellent soldier and devoted to sport and games, he was of that happy-go-lucky temperament which believes in letting things take their chance.

"Keep your weather eye open; swim with the tide if you possibly can, and you'll worry through all right, old girl!" he would say if Kate ventured to wonder whether she had acted advisably. "The Roxham luck may always be relied upon when we find ourselves in a tight corner. You're a Roxham now and the mother of two splendid little Roxhams; and things will turn up trumps, you may bet your best hat!"

It was through Roxham that Kenneth Derwent had joined their party. He was in the Civil Service, returning to India after leave. They had been stationed together at Trichinopoly, where Roxham was once sent on special duty. Both men had met Bonchester previously. Colonel Orban approved of Derwent and of Bonchester. Mrs. Orban liked them with something more than approval; but without the ulterior thought that lurked in her husband's mind concerning the suitability of either as a possible son-in-law.

Roxham and Derwent spent much of their time in the smoking-room during the bad weather. There they made the acquaintance of other travellers, among them the Earl of Rivenhall, a genial individual whose comfortable tweed suits, the worse for wear, entirely hid his rank and levelled him down into a commonplace globe-trotter, killing time and saving money to pay "those confounded death dues of the old Dad, you know, with which the estate is saddled; confound it!"

Lord Rivenhall was looking forward to some big game shooting wherever he could hear of it. Roxham

and Rivenhall plunged straightway into a conversation on sport, and a warm discussion of the various merits of weapons, a discussion which never came to an end. It was renewed day after day up to the very last moment and culminated in an expedition later on which has nothing to do with this story. Lord Rivenhall was brought up to the family semicircle in due course, and was introduced to the intense gratification of Colonel Orban, whose secret ambition was fired on behalf of his younger daughter. Rivenhall was invited to take one of the chairs, which he promptly did; and while the Colonel seized the opportunity of giving him his views on the condition of the Indian Army, Rivenhall allowed his eyes to rest on Delia, observing how wonderfully her large brown eyes matched her abundant brown hair; how white her teeth were contrasted with her lips when she smiled. She would look well in pearls; they would match her skin; and carnations were her flowers, he thought; they might be varied with orchids—the spotted orange and brown sort. His eyes dropped to her hands. She wore one insignificant pearl ring. He would have liked to have thrown it into the sea. How could women, rich or poor, wear discoloured pearls? They might as well wear discoloured garments! No; pearls, the best, only the best, were for her neck; and rubies should be on her fingers if he were consulted.

“—— and if they don't do something of the sort before long, the Indian Army will go to pieces,” concluded the Colonel.

“You think so! daresay you're right, sir. You know more about it than I do,” replied the ex-Eton boy, as he rose and wandered away in the direction of a steward, who bore an armful of skittle-pins towards that part of the deck given up to games. At this moment Bonchester came up.

“I say, Miss Orban, you've pretty well recovered your—yourself. Won't you come and try your hand at one of these deck games quoits or skittles or bull?”

Down went Dell's embroidery and she rose at once.

"Rather! Dad, you don't mind, do you, dear?"

The Colonel's eye followed Rivenhall.

"All right! Go and have a fling; you'll like skittles best."

They moved away following the globe-trotting peer; but were deflected by Derwent.

"You're just the people we want to make up our game of bull," he said. "I say, Bonchester, we're going to start tournaments as soon as we pass Gib. We must practise all we can in between this and then. Miss Orban have you ever played bull?"

"Never; it wasn't included in the games mistress's list at college."

"We'll coach you if you'll place yourself in our hands," said Derwent.

"And put you in the running for a prize," added Bonchester.

"Booby prize, I'm afraid!" rejoined Dell, laughing.

Derwent divided the company into two sides, introducing Dell to Betty Broadfield, a girl going out to India like herself for the first time. Betty brought an enormous capacity for enjoyment with her; and she as well as the rest of the party played with the whole-heartedness always to be found on board ship; where the attention in fine weather cannot be diverted by anything more exciting than a passing ship in the distance or a shoal of porpoises.

The game drew to an end and there was a close finish. It happened that Betty had to play the last shot. She swung the canvas-covered disc in the palm of her hand backwards and forwards, putting off the critical cast.

"Now, Miss Broadfield!" cried Derwent. "It's up to you to save us."

"Oh! don't! I'm getting so horribly nervous!"

"Shut your eyes; count ten and let fly!" counselled Bonchester, who was on the opposite side.

Betty began to shake.

"Hold your breath and then you won't laugh," said Derwent. "Now! ready! one! two! three! off!"

The laughter had got the better of her and she could do nothing. The players caught the infection, and for a time they were demoralised. Under Derwent's entreaties they pulled themselves together and he began to coach again.

"Hold the disc firmly under your thumb, so ; and let it lie on your palm with your fingers open. No ; it won't slip if you swing it so! That's all right!" continued Derwent, who was thoroughly enjoying his part of the coaching whatever his pupil may have thought of it. "Now, swing your arm, not too quick," he cautioned, as Betty began a violent pendulum motion. "Hold the disc firmly under your thumb——"

"And pay no attention to it if it squeaks!" added Dell with a flash of the irresistible mischief of a schoolgirl.

The remark upset the player a second time, and the disc flew wildly towards the bull board. It slithered across it in a devastating track, knocking two friendly men out of position and falling over the back of the chequered slope on to the deck.

"Oh! hang!" ejaculated Betty.

Fortunately her remark was drowned in the chorus of laughter as Colonel Orban came up.

"Aren't you going to play skittles, Delia?" he asked.

"No, Dad ; we've got to give these people a chance of taking their revenge. I'm afraid I was partly responsible for their losing the game just now. I spoke on the stroke."

Orban looked slightly disappointed.

"I thought Lord Rivenhall would have liked another game. The play is over and they can't pick up enough people to make a second."

He moved away and Betty approached with the free-masonry of the college girl.

"Does your father want you to stop playing?"

"Oh! it doesn't matter; it's all right!" She lowered her voice and added as if to herself, "I've no use for belted earls whatever father thinks!" by which it will be seen that Miss Delia Orban was cultivating a sturdy will of her own and a fine crop of home-grown opinions.

CHAPTER II

THE weather continued fine, and the Mediterranean proved beautiful and as fascinating as she can be on occasions when she chooses. The deck games proceeded apace and served their purpose admirably. Before Marseilles was reached the passengers had lost all reserve and had made friends over skittles and the bull board, concerts, cards and dances. Theatricals were talked of but had not come to a head.

Late one evening it was announced that the French port would be reached by noon on the following day. It was not without apprehension that many of the company contemplated the probable inroads which would be made upon the privacy of their cabins when the complement of overland passengers joined them. Strange boxes hidden beneath the sofa berths were pulled into view and new bunks sprang into existence. Pegs were cleared of encumbering garments and surplus racks, appropriated for books and shoes, were emptied. It was marvellous to note the ingenuity with which the cabin stewards found room to stem back the overflowing tide of properties and to place everything neatly within the proper and restricted limits.

"Who is coming into my cabin?" was a question frequently asked of the long-suffering and good-natured stewardess. It met with the same unemotional reply, "Can't say, Madam." "Impossible to tell, Miss." "Children?" "The head steward has not said."

"Oh! I hope it will be some one nice! This is an awful bother! We were so comfortable! Really, the

company ought not to fill up the ship like this," and so on.

It was the outward-bound season, and the more experienced travellers, knowing that every berth must be taken, had reconciled themselves to the inevitable and never allowed themselves to forget that they would soon be packed as tightly as it was possible. The inexperienced had much to learn. Colonel Orban with Roxham and Derwent were satisfied that they were safe from intrusion, as the cabin contained only three berths and was not capable of holding a fourth. Mrs. Orban and her two daughters were equally self-congratulatory on the same ground.

"And thank goodness! our table is filled up as well," said Colonel Orban to his wife as they watched the overland crowd arriving in detachments from the station. "We shall not have our party upset."

They were sitting on deck looking down upon the quay.

"What a lot of luggage!" commented Mrs. Orban as two carriages pulled up near the gangway. "One man only; the rest of the room taken up with his suit cases!"

The individual was tall and slightly built, and he stood with his back to the ship as he talked to the driver on the box.

"Looks like a cavalry officer; but what he wants with all that baggage I don't know," commented the Colonel. "He ought to have sent it round by the ship. He must have paid a pretty penny in over-weight. That's how these youngsters get rid of their money; and then they grumble and say that they can't live on their pay!"

"Perhaps he has been stopping in Paris," suggested his wife.

"Even then he could have sent it on ahead to the agents—by Jingo! he's a native!" cried the Colonel, as the new arrival turned and walked with deliberation towards the broad gangway that extended from the

wharf to the ship. The sun was full in his face as he passed up, stepped on deck and disappeared in the direction of the cabins.

Presently he reappeared with a steward ; and giving the man instructions he waited till all his property had been brought on board. Then he sauntered down the gangway and paid the two drivers.

The Colonel and his wife could not see the coin he gave each man ; but from the manner of the drivers they gathered that "for once in a blue moon," as Betty would have said, the Marseilles cocher was more than content ; he was delighted.

"Whoever the overland passenger may be, he knows his way about and is not new to this kind of travelling," remarked Mrs. Orban.

"Hope he is second class, anyway," rejoined her husband shortly.

"Doesn't look like it with all those nice tin suit cases."

"Some Bombay bazaar merchant bringing goods over from Paris as personal luggage. When he has sold the contents he'll palm off the cases as new."

"His things were taken over this side. I feel sure he's first class," said Mrs. Orban.

"Glad our cabin is filled up ; that's all I can say. No joke having a native as your stable companion for a fortnight !"

Mrs. Orban did not reply. She was aware of her husband's prejudices against the advanced and advancing Asiatic of modern days. Although she did not know Captain Hassan ud Deen of the Imperial Service Troops, A.D.C. and Private Secretary to the Nizam, her observant eyes told her that he was not a Bombay shopkeeper, nor would those numerous cases ever be in the market.

The *Aurangabad* made a short stay and, having shipped her passengers and mails, steamed out of harbour without waiting to sort the chaos of her baggage-encumbered decks. The sun dipped with an orange and

crimson flare below the oily surface of the Mediterranean, and a little later the dressing-bell rang. More than half the passengers who had come round by the Bay went down to their cabins to change amid difficulties. The new-comer was struggling with a chaotic unpacking that looked hopeless; but order was evolved; and somehow or other the dressing was accomplished in time.

Colonel Orban was the most punctual of men. Before the trumpet had finished its dinner-call he had reached the saloon. He stood at the head of his table, his hand upon the back of his chair, and waited for the appearance of his wife and daughters, too punctilious to take his place until they joined him. The rest of the party being of his own sex might come and go as they pleased.

Before Mrs. Orban arrived one of the overland passengers moved up the saloon and stopped before the table. He was in evening dress. Colonel Orban scarcely glanced at him and failed to recognise "the Bombay bazaar-man" he had seen on the quay. In the artificial light of the saloon he did not notice his complexion. Secure in the belief that the table was fully appropriated, he thought nothing of the stranger. However longingly an outsider might contemplate those seven seats he could not take one without the Colonel's consent.

Mrs. Orban hurried up, followed by Delia and Kate. They dropped into their usual places and as they did so the Colonel sank into his revolving chair. As soon as they were settled Captain Hassan moved quietly down behind Mrs. Orban's and Delia's chairs and was about to seat himself on the sofa at the lower end of the table facing the Colonel. His movement electrified Orban, who gazed with a sudden concentration of attention at the intruder and recognised the Asiatic.

"Excuse me! this table is engaged," he said.

Hassan, arrested in his design, remained standing behind Delia's chair glancing from one to another of the Orban family with the quick sensitiveness of his race.

"I beg your pardon; I understood—— Sorry! my mistake!"

They were the words of an Englishman. The Colonel would have been better pleased if the reply had been in Hindustani. It was part and parcel of the modern presumption of the native, in his opinion, to adopt the expressions of the West. Hassan slowly retraced his steps to seek for an explanation of the mistake he had apparently made; and the Colonel resumed his seat. "D——d cheek!" was the comment that echoed in his mind; but he was too well-bred to give it expression. With an effort he conquered his annoyance and spoke to his wife.

"It seems as if there won't be accommodation enough. They'll have to duplicate the meals."

"That's been done already. They can't have a third dinner," replied Mrs. Orban placidly.

"Then the company should either limit the number of passengers, or make better arrangements for seating them."

"Who is that handsome man?" asked Dell of her sister across the table.

"Don't know; hush! he's coming back."

"What fun!" whispered Dell. "Look! they've set a place for some one at our end of the table. Oh! I do hope it's for him! I'm sure he is a native prince."

Behind Hassan walked the steward.

"There's your seat, sir. Sorry to have to give you the sofa; but we're crowded as usual." He spoke hurriedly with the manner of a man whose work is never done even though his day may extend to eighteen hours.

Colonel Orban rose again. Ignoring Hassan who was making his way back to the end of the table, he said in a quiet restrained voice that covered a perturbed mind—

"Steward, this table is engaged for my own private party, and I wish it to be kept private."

"Very sorry, sir. We've had to fill up all the sofa seats, as you will see if you look round."

"Can't that—that gentleman," in spite of his endeavour to be unemotional and to preserve an even politeness, there was a disagreeable emphasis on the word gentleman, "dine at the next dinner? You have one at eight, I believe."

"The eight-o'clock dinner is equally full, sir. As this gentleman wished to dine at seven the chief steward has arranged it in this way. If you want to make any alteration you had better speak to the chief steward after dinner."

As Hassan took his seat the table attendant hurried away to join the cue of waiters before the steaming soup tureen on the sideboard. At that moment Roxham and Bonchester appeared. They glanced at the stranger sitting between the two sisters at the end of the table, and instantly plunged into conversation that they made general with the exception of Hassan. Kate and Dell responded, and the Colonel was left to recover himself as best he could. He hesitated before seating himself again, in doubt whether to seek the head steward at once. Mrs. Orban divined the cause of his hesitation and touched his arm.

"Sit down, Austin. Food first; fuss afterwards, if you mean to make a fuss," she said in a low voice that was not heard by any one else under the buzz of conversation that had arisen among the younger members of the party.

He sat down silenced by the little wave of astonishment which usually overwhelmed him when his wife on very rare occasions took command. The soup was finished under the chatter, and Hassan was the only one of the party to preserve silence. He sat with eyes lowered upon the table-cloth looking at Dell's right hand as she fingered her bread, rolling it with unconscious nervousness into little pills. She knew her father's attitude towards foreigners generally, and she was frankly in fear lest the good-looking stranger should be driven away. Hassan had time to notice the delicate rose-coloured palm that ended in a straight

line where it touched the ivory white of the back of her hand. The women of his nation had pale brown or straw-coloured palms. He wondered if that alluring tint of the rising sun was the inheritance of all English women alike. He thought not; he did not remember having noticed it in so marked a degree in the hands of the sisters and mothers of the men he had met at school and college. He was roused from his reverie by Derwent, who had arrived late and was about to slip into his chair between Mrs. Orban and Dell. Before doing so, however, he walked up to the stranger and held out his hand with a smile of surprise and pleasure.

"Hello! Hassan! who would have thought of meeting you here! How are you? Had a good time in Paris?"

They shook hands and the conversation died down as suddenly as it had arisen. Colonel Orban wore a puzzled expression, not unmingled with consternation. He had felt uncivil towards the stranger, whatever he might have appeared, and he was distinctly uncomfortable.

"Poor old Dad! he'll have to climb down a bit," was Dell's thought as she caught her sister's eye.

Mrs. Orban again seized the rudder lines, and steered the course she thought best.

"Will you introduce me to your friend, Mr. Derwent?" she said.

The Colonel, startled into action, touched her foot under the table. What was the good of rushing into an acquaintance that bristled with difficulties? How foolish she was! Why couldn't she let things alone? She took no notice of his hint; and when the introduction had been made, she put more fat in the fire in the Colonel's opinion by saying in her clear slow voice—

"I am so sorry Captain Hassan, that we did not know you were Mr. Derwent's friend. We are fortunate in having you as an addition to our party instead of a total stranger."

A second touch from the bewildered Colonel had no more effect than the first. Mrs. Orban smiled genially as Hassan politely acknowledged the belated welcome.

"The good fortune is on my side. I'm delighted ; and very grateful for your welcome."

The personal note was for her. Somehow it excluded her husband. "D——d nuisance !" was his inward comment, as his eyes unconsciously rested on his younger daughter. Dell's pleasure and interest were unmistakable. She and her sister were introduced with the added remark from Derwent that he and Hassan had known each other a long time.

"We were at Eton together," he explained, "and later we met at Oxford again. Quite by chance we went up to the same college in the same year. Ripping times ! weren't they, Hassan ?"

"Rather ! I was at the 'Varsity for Commem. this year."

"Lucky chap ! I couldn't go. I suppose you played polo—but of course, you wouldn't find any of the old lot left."

"I've been playing at Hurlingham though ; and I've sent out half a dozen of the best ponies I could find to Hyderabad."

"Don't think English ponies will do much good there ; too much sun."

"It's worth trying anyway. I want to test them against Australians."

The Colonel listened and drew his own conclusions. This must be one of the Hyderabad princes. These men were of the best Muhammadan blood in India, and they were as proud as they were rich. He was glad on the whole that he had refrained from making the crude remarks about Bombay shopkeepers that had again come into his mind on Hassan's intrusion.

The conversation gradually became normal. Derwent, who had been obliged to speak to Hassan across Dell, turned to Mrs. Orban, to whom he made further

explanations which were not without a spontaneous addition of praise. Hassan was such a good fellow, he was sure they would all like him. The Colonel listened, and the trouble gradually faded from his eyes, even though it was plain that Dell was deeply interested in the conversation she was carrying on with her new neighbour.

She was already questioning him about himself and his profession. As she listened her brown eyes rested on his. They recalled eyes he had known when he was a big boy, home from Eton for the one holiday he had been allowed to take in the course of his English education. It was between school and college, and it lasted nearly a year. The eyes belonged to a small child he chanced to see running with his sister through his mother's rooms; she wore full satin trousers and muslin tunic, but was a girl in spite of her garments. She was of a pale olive complexion with curved red lips. Her long thick hair hung in two plaits down her back. Into the plaits were woven strings of pearls. A garland of roses was round her neck, and the scent of the flowers never failed to remind him of her. She was too young to be restricted to the curtain and still went free in the open air and sunshine.

As she entered the room through the arched doorway she ran straight towards him, clasped him round the legs and with a shriek of excitement cried for protection from the shaitan.

The shaitan was none other than his own half-brother, Yasin, the son of Fazeela, his mother's hand-maid, a ten-year-old youngster as full of mischief as he could be. He had tied a piece of black muslin over his face and swathed himself with a sheet. His claw-like fingers were extended as he pursued the child, and he made blood-curdling noises such as evil spirits are supposed to delight in emitting.

Hassan caught up the little Nissa Bee and held her high out of reach of the fearsome demon; and she squealed from her secure position with excitement.

His own sister, no bigger than Nissa Bee, looked on in amazement, scandalised by her display of emotion.

"Stop, Yasin ; you mustn't frighten Nissa like that ; you will make her ill. Take off that cloth and veil. There ! look ! it is only that naughty Yasin," Hassan added as Yasin, who adored his elder brother, obeyed.

The child poured out her thanks without restraint, allowing emotion of another kind to sway her just as extravagantly as her fear.

"Ah ! my beloved ! my sun ! my moon ! Thou hast caught the shaitan and shut him up. Yasin has come back. I love thee ! I love thee for it and I will never forget thee."

She put her lips to his as she was accustomed to kiss those in her mother's household who petted her ; and the boy, to whom love had been a stranger all the years he had spent in that far-away foreign land, felt his heart leap towards the little one who kissed him so warmly. He put her down, and without another thought of her deliverer she scampered away with Suffoorah, his sister, to continue their games elsewhere. He stood looking after the delicate little figure, contrasting her with the stolid English children who had stared at him in England. True, the roses were not in her cheeks, nor the glow of the rising sun within the palms of her hands ; yet she was rare and dainty and full of a nervous vitality not possessed by the plump country maids of the roads round Eton.

Something in Dell's eyes reminded him of Nissa Bee. Again, when she smiled, the lips curved in the same way like a delicate bird on the wing ; and he thought of that young mouth that had been so readily placed on his in a warm gush of gratitude.

He never set eyes on Nissa Bee again. When he returned from England his course at Oxford was finished and he was twenty-one, ready to receive his commission. By that time Nissa was eleven. She no longer ran free, nor paid visits to friends where she might meet their brothers. Her gosha, a privilege

and birthright, had begun; and being like himself a member of a wealthy and princely house, the gosha was strict and rigidly observed. He asked no questions as to her welfare, but he treasured within his heart that memory and fostered it with all the romanticism of his ancient race. Now as Dell lifted her hand while she was talking to him, her eyes dancing, her lips curving as Nissa Bee's had done, he again noted the rose-leaf palm and wondered if Nissa's were as beautiful.

CHAPTER III

CAPTAIN HASSAN did his best to reply to all Dell's eager questions, but it was not easy. Mrs. Roxham was equally anxious to have a word with him. Her husband was in the artillery, and was stationed at Trimulgherry, close to Hyderabad.

"I wonder I haven't met you there," she said, looking at him again as she searched back in her memory.

"I have not been much in Hyderabad. Before I left for England, nearly a year ago, I was in Calcutta and Simla. I was sent on special duty—on the Nizam's private business," he explained, as she seemed surprised that a man in the Imperial service should have duty in those places away from his corps.

He spoke English with a slight foreign accent; but he used the idiom of the men who sat at table with him.

"Mr. Derwent mentioned Paris, I think. You have been staying there?"

"For a couple of months. I went over with some friends. One of them, who has lately lost his father, promised to meet me on the *Aurungabad*; but I saw nothing of him on the train. He went back to England; perhaps he came round by the Bay. Did you get a bucketing, by-the-bye?"

"It was pretty bad all down the Channel and worse still in the Bay. Of course we were all gosha—I mean——" She stopped with a little laugh of embarrassment at having made use of a word which might mean something different in his ears. He laughed too.

"Gosha means hidden, as I daresay you know if

you've been in India before. So you used the word properly."

"Any one who was genuinely sea-sick would certainly wish to hide if I may judge by my own feelings. I hid my head under the blanket—it was bitterly cold—and slept till I felt better."

By the time dinner was at an end Hassan had established himself on a friendly footing with the party, without doing anything more than showing himself in his natural colours as a well-bred Muhammadan such as that wonderful city Hyderabad turns out in her princely families. Even the Colonel recognised something which he had never seen before in a native of any other town. As they left the table a little later he found an opportunity of saying—

"Sorry I didn't see the place laid for you, Captain Hassan."

"My fault; I should have asked the steward to explain. I'm not surprised that you thought I was intruding."

Though the Colonel might apologise for his reception of the man, he none the less drew himself up as he did it with the air of settling a distasteful business and putting an end to it. Polite and civil they might be, but a line must be drawn at anything approaching intimacy.

They parted with Hassan at the foot of the broad companion stairway, and he went back to the large cabin that he occupied alone, having paid in full for the four berths it contained. A change had been wrought since he dressed for dinner. The cabin steward, whose willing services had already been bought by a piece of paper that made the man's eyes shine as he handled it, had tidied and put away the contents of the suit cases.

"I've laid out everything you'll want, sir, for the present. Here is your cigarette case. If you're going up on deck you will be glad of a top coat. The evenings are chilly at present."

The steward held out a light coat and Hassan slipped into it. A few more directions were given and questions asked. Meanwhile, Colonel Orban had followed his wife on deck and seated himself in his outpost chair. He did not smoke. The other three men of his party went off to the smoking-room, and he was alone with wife and daughters. As soon as they had wrapped themselves in the cloaks, which they had left ready when they went down to dinner, he seized the opportunity of explaining his wishes. He addressed his wife; but he intended his daughters to hear, especially Delia, who was still under his control. Kate had a husband to reckon with, but with Delia it was different; he regarded himself as responsible for her welfare.

"Now, look here, Susie," he began. "I won't have that man encouraged."

"All right," acquiesced Mrs. Orban placidly, tucking a cushion under her neck as she leaned back in the long deck chair.

"It's a mistake to give an inch to the native in these days. He thinks himself every bit as good as we are. Bless my soul! what would my father have said if he had been asked to admit this man to his table?"

Considering the strong prejudice of the son, no one of the party ventured a surmise as to how that son's sire would have expressed himself on the subject.

"Things have altered since then. Natives were not sent to England to be educated in those days," remarked Mrs. Roxham.

"You may educate the native all you like, Kate; you will never alter his heathenish opinion of women. He looks at them from a different standpoint altogether from the Englishman. It always irritates me to see the girls in England making themselves cheap to the Asiatic. They little know what the fellows think of them! I assure you that no good can come of encouraging an intimacy of this kind."

"Captain Hassan doesn't strike me as being like one of the natives we see in London. He belongs to a

better class, a finer race ; he is in fact a gentleman in the proper sense of the word," said Mrs. Orban.

"As long as it pleases him to behave as such," added her husband. "If we could see him at home among his wives. . . ."

"His wives! Oh, Dad! I don't believe he is married!" protested Dell, interrupting her father.

"I'll bet you anything you like he is," retorted the Colonel ; "and what is more, he'll be married again and again before he is my age."

"He's handsome enough to have as many wives as Solomon for the asking," said Dell a little truculently, as her eyes rested on the young moon flushed in its western setting.

"What! what! handsome! I don't call him handsome; features too regular; no expression," objected the Colonel.

"Think what expression might be called up on those features, if any one chose to probe the depths of his feelings and stir his emotion!"

"Yes!" agreed the Colonel unexpectedly. "It's never difficult to raise Cain in the Asiatic."

Dell was not thinking at the moment of raising Cain's particular passion; she had in her mind quite another emotion; but she kept her thoughts to herself.

"He must have been taught self-restraint," said Mrs. Orban, finding that her daughter did not reply. "As he talked to me at dinner I felt as if I were listening to an Englishman. No; I couldn't imagine him losing control over his temper and forgetting himself."

"That's all you know about the native, my dear," replied the Colonel with the superior air that always brought a kindly twinkle to his wife's eye. It had a different effect, however, on his younger daughter, who made a slight movement of impatience. Her father did not see it and he blundered on, raising a shadow of the old Adam where he least expected it. "Anyway, I know exactly what the Muhammadan is in his own

country ; and I don't wish this man to be encouraged. We shall see quite enough——”

He stopped short ; for the individual under discussion appeared and, recognising them as his companions at the dinner-table, he stood still and remarked on the beauty of the night. Colonel Orban was silent, and his silence had no sort of welcome in it. Dell looked up with the smile Nissa Bee bestowed upon her deliverer from the shaitan, and said—

“Won't you sit down, Captain Hassan ? Take my brother-in-law's chair.” She laid her hand on the chair by her side to add weight to her invitation. “He is in the smoking-room and won't be joining us just yet. Yes ; it is a glorious evening ; ideal even for the Mediterranean.”

Hassan dropped into the deck lounge with the ease of a man who was accustomed to the good things of this world. Colonel Orban was struck dumb by his daughter's audacity. He was unable to find relief in speech, because the words that came to his lips were not such as he could make use of. He rose hastily, and murmuring something about getting a game of bridge, walked off to find a mental atmosphere less charged with electricity.

His play was erratic. Nothing but a run of exceptionally good luck saved him from disaster. He could not get away from the terrible thought, that here, before his eyes and in the very bosom of his family, was about to be enacted one of those hopeless tragedies of misplaced affection between mixed races, against which he was never tired of inveighing.

There was no getting away from the situation ; no leaving the ship and taking another route. Whatever happened they must all be penned within the limited space afforded by the *Aurungabad*. A full fortnight was before them. If the attraction to the man was strong enough to cause Delia in the space of a few hours to act in direct opposition to his expressed wishes, what would it be at the end of that time ? It made him

shudder with nervous dread as he contemplated the possibilities.

As for his wife, she seemed absolutely blind to the situation. And Kate was no better. He wondered how long they would sit there with that man in their pockets, losing their foolish hearts to the veneer Eton and Oxford had set upon him.

He rose from the card-table sooner than usual, and gave up his place to Betty's uncle, Westleton, a move no one opposed under the circumstances. An indifferent player was better than an absent-minded one. He heard the sound of the deck piano. Curiosity and anxiety combined to draw him towards the circling couples. It was with intense relief that he caught sight of Delia floating round with Rivenhall.

He watched them as they passed him in the dance. A little later they stopped, and Orban noted with returning satisfaction how Rivenhall listened and responded with appreciation to Dell's chaff and chatter. If only her fancy would turn that way, what a happy thing it would be for all parties! Somehow it did not enter into his calculations that Rivenhall might not play his part of the little drama. The music came to an end, and Derwent in company with Hassan joined the couple.

"Confound the fellow! why can't he keep his distance?" was Orban's inward comment.

As if in obedience to the desire that caused the remark, Rivenhall occupied Hassan's attention, and Dell moved away with Derwent. She had promised him the dance early in the day before the stranger had appeared on the scenes. Again a spirit of criticism was evoked in the Colonel's mind, as he observed the excellent terms on which the two men stood. What was Lord Rivenhall about to be so familiar with a man of that colour? The question was answered by Hassan himself, although he had not heard it.

"I have found my Paris friend, you see, Colonel Orban. He came round by the Bay with you."

They strolled on without stopping, and disappeared in the smoking-room, where they consumed endless cigarettes and talked sport till it was time to turn in. To his relief the Colonel saw no more of Hassan that evening. He also lost sight of Delia and Derwent until she came to bid him good night.

"I think, Dad, that Captain Hassan is quite the most fascinating man I have ever met. If India is made up of such people, I shall wish that I had a thousand hearts to lose instead of only one."

Then she turned to her mother and gave expression to another extravagant wish that only made her mother smile.

"I've had such a happy evening! Oh! I wish the voyage was going to last weeks and weeks instead of only days!"

CHAPTER IV

THE *Aurungabad* was moored near the quay at Port Said. It was a cloudless day with a brilliant sun. The cool morning breeze made it bearable and tempted the passengers to land. After breakfast Dell said—

"I am going ashore, Mother."

"With whom?" replied Mrs. Orban without lifting her eyes from her work.

"With Captain Hassan."

"Any one else?"

"Oh yes! Kate and Gerald; Betty and the Westletons and two or three more of our party are coming too. We shall be away all day, as the ship does not leave till midnight, we are told."

"Where are you lunching, Delia?" asked Colonel Orban, more with intent to let his daughter know that he was listening than out of curiosity.

"I don't know. We are Captain Hassan's guests. He is sure to give us the very best that is to be had. Oh! here he is! Captain Hassan! this is quite too splendid of you! I'm going to enjoy myself as I've never enjoyed myself before!"

She went towards him in her light draperies, a vision of delight for any man's eyes. It was plain that Hassan fully appreciated his privileges. He had no eyes for any one else.

"I've secured a boat, and if you are ready we will start at once."

They moved away in the direction of the gangway where the rest of the party had assembled. The Colonel regarded the pair gloomily.

"That daughter of yours is out for trouble," he said. When any of their offspring failed to please him he found a vague comfort in saddling his wife with the whole burden of possession. If on the other hand they distinguished themselves, it was "my son" and "my daughter."

"Out for fun you mean, Austin."

"You won't think it fun when she asks you to accept that Muhammadan as a son-in-law. Did you hear what they were talking about this morning at breakfast?"

"Something was said about going ashore. I wasn't listening, to tell you the truth. Mr. Derwent was so interesting on the subject of Hyderabad. He is going back to his appointment there. He tells me that no Europeans are allowed to enter the town without permission."

"I assure you that Delia and Hassan were discussing love and marriage! love and marriage!" he repeated as though his words might be misunderstood. "Good Heavens! Fancy encouraging or even allowing a Muhammadan to air his views on love and marriage! They would be about as edifying as Don Juan's!"

The sights of Port Said were soon exhausted and Hassan's party turned to the curio shops, where several purchases were made. Hassan himself picked up a quaint antique in the shape of a pendant amulet of fine Egyptian gold set with rubies and pearls. It was Dell who discovered it in a tray of strange odds and ends; some absolutely worthless strings of glass beads; others of value for their artistic workmanship and antiquity. When they left the shop and were again strolling down the streets, he placed the amulet in her hand, and asked her if she would take it with much the same air that Derwent had previously offered her a box of Turkish delight. She accepted it in the same spirit without hesitation, as if it had been a box of chocolate. Not being an expert in antique jewelry and old gems, she was totally ignorant of the value of the ornament. To a man of his wealth the cost was not a matter to trouble

about ; but not another man in the party could have afforded to buy jewels of that kind and give them away as if they were bonbons. Hassan was rewarded by the pleasure that shone in her eyes as she thanked him. At the next stopping-place she took the opportunity of fastening the chain round her neck. The sun caught the gems, and Hassan—if no one else—recognised that he had secured something rare and fine.

In their wanderings through the town the party, large as it was, kept together. There was no separating and pairing off ; yet a certain selection was apparent. Hassan and Derwent walked by Dell, who divided her attention equally between the two men. Once when they fell back to discuss the merits of an old Indian sword which took Derwent's fancy, Rivenhall seized the opportunity of claiming her as a companion. His eye took in the new piece of jewelry.

"That's a nice thing you've bought. They're true pigeon's blood rubies," he remarked.

"I didn't buy it myself. Captain Hassan gave it me just now," she replied with unnecessary frankness.

Rivenhall raised his eyebrows ever so slightly, and Dell became vaguely conscious that there was a mistake somewhere. The disquietude was momentary, and Rivenhall put her at her ease instantly.

"I admire his taste. Did you see the stuff I bought? Those damascened swords were the real old article. If I wasn't so stony-broke, I would have had that shield inlaid with gold. It would have looked splendid in the Rivenhall house. I'm not sure I shan't go back after lunch, and see if I can't come to terms. It takes days to make satisfactory bargains with these Arabs. If you don't want to buy anything more let's get out of this shop ; it's so stuffy."

"All right ; but don't you love that smell of the East? It's everywhere—out here in the street as well as inside the shop."

The sun caught the gems in the pendant and again Rivenhall's eyes were drawn to it. He was thinking

that he had been quite correct in his opinion. Pearls and rubies suited her colouring. There were some fine ruby ornaments among the Rivenhall heirlooms. They would look well on a woman like Miss Orban.

They waited in the open till the rest of the party joined them. Lunch was the next event on the programme. It was ready by the time they reached the hotel. After being a fortnight at sea it was pleasant to sit at a large table again with plenty of elbow room and a perfectly steady floor underfoot. They moved into the broad shaded verandah for coffee. Cigarettes and little dishes of dates were served with the coffee.

The sun was still hot. Another stroll in the town was suggested, but as the sights were exhausted and the best shops had been ransacked, there was a divided opinion about carrying out the suggestion. Derwent had not been successful in his quest for some object he particularly desired to purchase, and he wished to explore another street where the shops were less attractive. Rivenhall remembered the shield that had roused his envy. Another half-hour of bargaining might bring it within his means.

"If you want to do some more shopping, Derwent," he said, "I'll come with you."

Derwent glanced round at the party extended in various attitudes of luxurious repose upon comfortable lounges. His eye rested on Dell, at whose side sat Hassan. She returned his glance and laughed.

"No! don't look at me like that, Mr. Derwent!" she said. "I'm not coming. Nothing short of a fire in the house will stir me till tea-time. After tea Captain Hassan is going to take us for a run up the harbour in that delightful little launch he has had the luck to find somewhere."

He met with no encouragement from Mrs. Roxham either. She was already more than half asleep. Nor from Betty, who was counting and sorting a number of picture postcards assisted by Bonchester.

Hassan watched Derwent with some curiosity. Would the latter be annoyed at her refusal to accompany him? Apparently Derwent had no feeling in the matter; for he turned away with a laugh, telling them that they were all a lot of lazy rotters not worth talking about; a piece of friendly abuse which gave no offence.

The ways of Englishmen with women were strange. Long as he had been in England Hassan failed to understand them. There was no doubt in his mind that Derwent was attracted to Miss Orban; that he often lingered by her side; his eyes were frequently fixed upon her with a dreamy expression that he could not interpret. Sometimes Hassan wondered if some arrangement had been made between Derwent and Colonel Orban. Then as he thought it over he remembered that it was not the custom to dispose of a daughter without first obtaining her consent. The choice really lay with the woman. The man might ask; her parents might be favourable; but the privilege of choice was with the girl and the casting vote in her hands.

And the field was an open field. Every man had a chance. He himself had a chance if he chose to enter the lists. He would not be the first of his creed and race to marry an English wife. He knew of a case where a mixed marriage had been made with a certain amount of success. Oddly enough the bride's people were more reconciled to the marriage than the bridegroom's relatives. The man had gone into voluntary exile for the sake of his wife. He had made his home in England and expatriated himself and his children, allowing them to be brought up as Englishmen. The expatriation was more than a mere residence in a foreign country. It meant being cut off altogether from his family, from father and mother, brothers and sisters. His English wife was unrecognised by his family, and his children were considered illegitimate, even though the marriage ceremony had been performed

according to Muhammadan as well as Christian rites. After Derwent's departure there was silence, broken by occasional spells of chatter.

"You look serious, Captain Hassan," remarked Dell after one of the pauses. Had he been an Englishman she would have offered him a penny for his thoughts. She was not sure if he would understand the meaning of such a request, so she forbore to ask it. "Has the gate of the East, as Port Said is called, given you a warm welcome and roused memories; or has it drawn a blank?"

"Memories!" he repeated, looking round him at the white walls and tall pillars. "Yes! This house—the people in the streets—the sunshine and a hundred other sights and sounds have stirred my memory. Home seems nearer and England is left behind."

"This is my first introduction. I have no recollection of India; I was too young when I was brought home to remember even my ayah. This is the first day that I have felt the possibilities of an Eastern sun and have understood how hot it can be. We have nothing like this in England."

She indicated the bamboo blinds that hung between the pillars and swung gently in the sea-breeze, tapping the masonry gently with a rhythmic sound that lulled Mrs. Roxham and the Westletons into deeper slumber.

"Do you think that you will like the life?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm sure I shall like it; I shall revel in it. I'm afraid it will be rather an idle life, and I ought to be ashamed of liking such a thing. There's something very luxurious in this sort of thing. The ladies of your family live like this, don't they? They must have plenty of time for reading and working; as I shall have, I suppose."

"They don't read or work," he said, his eyes resting on hers as though new thoughts were awakening under the influence of the East.

The lids of her own lowered under that gaze, and he noted the curl of the dark eyelashes.

"What are their eyes for, then, if they don't make use of them?"

"It is not easy to explain. With us, unmarried women have only one object in life. It is to look beautiful and charm their future husbands."

"Is there no other way of pleasing them but by looking beautiful?"

"Later, perhaps; when they become mothers they have a fresh beauty in their maternity."

"It is odd how extremes meet in unexpected places. You make me think of Lord Rivenhall. Now when he chooses a wife, I can fancy the point of view he will never lose sight of—unless of course he falls violently and accidentally in love. She must be picturesque, and have a good figure to set off the family diamonds. She must carry her head well, because on important occasions the tiara of diamonds that his mother and grandmother wore will have to rest upon it. Like his house—for which he wants those old weapons and the skins of the wild beasts he is going to shoot—she must be perfectly appointed, and always presentable to the public eye; a credit to his name as well as to him personally."

"Mustn't she provide him with an heir?"

"That's incidental; he doesn't think of that when he is making his choice."

"It is the first consideration with us——"

"I think you were telling me at breakfast," she said, interrupting him, "you marry without love. I couldn't do that! it's so cold-blooded."

"The love comes after marriage."

"Ah! that's just it! Does it? I shouldn't like to risk it. I should want to hear from the man himself that he loved me, that he was giving me measure for measure—full measure without stint."

Hassan did not reply. A warm light came into his eyes as he followed the train of thought her words roused. He looked across at Betty. The cards had slipped to the floor forgotten altogether as Bonchester

leaned towards her and spoke in low tones. The colour mounted in her cheeks and her hands played nervously with the envelope that should have contained the scattered cards. What was he saying? How did these freedom-loving Englishmen tell women of their love? How did they maintain the balance between passion and restraint?

Bonchester took the envelope from Betty's fingers and passed his hand over hers with a light lingering touch that must have had some meaning in it. How much did it convey to her mind? As Hassan made no reply, Dell continued—

"A marriage could not be happy unless the man and the woman were sure of their love for each other before the knot was tied. They could not be sure of it unless they saw something of each other before the marriage."

He roused himself from the reverie into which he had fallen.

"Such a thing as you suggest would be an impossibility if you were of my race," he said.

"Why would it be impossible?"

"Because we are not allowed to see our brides until the ceremony has been completed."

The statement seemed incredible.

"The ceremony of betrothal you mean."

"No," he replied decisively. "We don't see each other till we are husband and wife."

"I don't understand how a man can be married without seeing his bride; she must be present surely."

"It is not necessary. The contract that binds them together is made before the Qazi or magistrate. The mother of the bride answers for her daughter; the bridegroom speaks for himself with his father's and mother's consent. When the contract is completed the couple are legally married, and nothing can separate them but divorce. If the girl is present she is completely veiled. In our family she would be absent."

"Do you mean to say that when you marry—you personally, I mean—you will not set eyes upon your wife till the marriage is completed——?"

"——and she is brought to my house for the honeymoon—you call it, I think."

"Then how do you choose your wife if you can't see her?"

"As I was going to tell you this morning; our parents choose for us."

"It's amazing! and you abide by their choice?"

"Certainly."

Again there was a pause. Then Dell raised herself in her long chair and sat up. The movement brought her a little nearer to him as she leaned forward.

"Captain Hassan, don't you sometimes wish that you had been born an Englishman?"

"Since I have known you I think I have had that wish," was the reply spoken in a low tone.

She rose with a little laugh, not of embarrassment but of amusement.

"You're getting on—fast. See! there's Lord Rivenhall. He has got the coveted shield. And here comes Mr. Derwent looking as if he had brought the contents of one of the shops with him."

Tea was ordered, and after it the party went down to the quay where the boat Hassan had secured for the day awaited them.

"By what magic do you manage to get hold of a steam launch like this?" asked Dell as she settled herself on the cushions.

"It belongs to my father's agent." Seeing that she was still mystified he added, "My family own large estates. The produce is sent abroad; and Port Said is one of the ports."

"I didn't know your father was a merchant."

"Pardon me, he is not a merchant. He is like one of your peers who owns coal mines or quarries."

Hassan spoke diffidently. Boasting about his family was not a weakness; but in fairness to his ancestors he

could not leave her under the impression that they were traders. He was one of the Hyderabad princes, ranking near to the Nizam, although he occupied no throne. It was doubtful if Dell understood his position or realised his blue blood.

The evening was glorious. The sun set in a warm haze of heat which could be felt now that the sea-breeze had died down. The moon in its rising shone with an increasing silvery gleam. The water, oily in its smoothness, reflected sky and land, buildings and ships. Beyond the town with its busy streets, its motley inhabitants and rows of lights lay the silent desert, a vast level stretch of sand, hugging its secrets of life and death to its bosom.

The scene had a strange effect upon Dell. She felt as if she stood on the threshold of a new life. The warm voluptuous atmosphere enveloped her and brought new influences to bear; she felt the stirring of a part of her psychic nature that had hitherto been asleep. The spell of the evening was not upon Dell alone; it rested upon the whole party. Even the practical Roxham and prosaic Westleton were sensible of its effect and dropped into occasional silence. If they had been asked to describe their frame of mind they would have said that they were too lazy to think and far too lazy to talk. The launch cut through the water with a pleasant swish, while her engines throbbed with a small purring noise that sounded strange after the muffled thunder of the *Aurungabad*.

Hassan had seated himself near Dell. A curious silence fell upon him. He had felt its influence in the verandah of the hotel. It was a golden silence, the result of a sense of the inadequacy of speech at such a period. As the rapid twilight of the east dropped over the earth, something within him quickened into full pulsing vitality; the torpidity of his senses, induced by the cold climate of the temperate zone, rolled away; leaving behind it a revived sensitiveness of the emotions, sharp and strong. The east was sweeping with its

fingers across the strings of his soul, probing depths far below the veneer of his western education and training.

He glanced at his companion, and under cover of the rapidly advancing darkness drew insensibly nearer. She was leaning back against the cushions, one hand on her lap, the other lying on the seat by her side, palm uppermost in the lazy abandonment of pleasure.

Moved by an impulse he did not stop to fathom, he let his own hand fall softly upon her palm and rest there for a short moment. As his fingers closed on hers he was acutely conscious of a response; her own closed on his with a corresponding gentleness. Soft and fleeting as was the touch, it was electric; and he was startled. What he expected or what he intended to convey, he could not have said.

There was another surprise for him in the manner in which she received the action. Her eyes were raised to his with a quick frank smile. No sign of annoyance was visible, nor did she show a disturbed self-consciousness. His action was received as if it were a homage; and he was astounded at himself—at her—at the ease and quiet sequence of events that were strange and foreign to men of his race. Her manner of accepting his action gave it its character and invested it with innocence. Well indeed might the English display their motto: *Honi soit qui mal y pense*—shame be to him who thinks evil! No woman in his own country could have received that touch with such quiet self-possession. He was beginning to understand how it was that Englishmen could woo their wives; how the women could give character to that wooing and make it a beautiful art, a subtle emotion instead of a blatant passion.

As for himself he could not imitate her example. Although he remained outwardly calm he was conscious of inward fires. The touch of her hand sent the blood to his head and blinded him to all sense of place and time. The world held but himself and one other

person, the woman by his side. All else was forgotten in that mad moment. What might have happened if he had not been recalled to his senses no one could have said.

"I think we had better be getting back to the ship, Hassan, or we shan't have time to dress for dinner," said the voice of Derwent in his customary tones as he broke off a conversation with Mrs. Roxham.

"Ah! yes, Captain Hassan," said Delia without stirring, without moving the hand that had been so softly and lightly caressed by his. "We've had a splendid time thanks to you; but we mustn't be late or my daddy will have something serious to say about the irresponsibility of the rising generation."

Hassan moved to the stern in a dream from which he could not rouse himself. He spoke to the man at the wheel and gave the necessary orders. The boatmen turned the launch and they were soon speeding towards the ship which was not far away. His guests expressed their gratitude but he made no response. His mind was in too chaotic a turmoil to realise what they were saying. He had become suddenly aware of the fact that though he might dress, speak and behave like an Englishman, he was an Oriental at heart. Why had he played the Englishman for even a single moment? It was madness. Where would his action lead him? He did not know. He must wait till he had mastered himself and his emotions before he could reckon with consequences.

Dell made no attempt to break the silence in which he wrapped himself. She had a suspicion that certain emotions had been stirred. While the rest of the party talked of the moon, of their purchases, of the reflections in the water, she was wondering vaguely whether she had gone too far, and had "raised Cain," as her father put it, in a temperament she could not fathom.

"Have you enjoyed yourself, Miss Orban?" asked Derwent moving over to the seat vacated by Hassan, who remained by the steersman to give directions.

"Enormously!" she caught her breath in a little sigh of intense pleasure. "I hope Captain Hassan has enjoyed it as much as I have."

She glanced towards the end of the boat. He was not too far away to have heard what she said. He gave no sign, however, that her words had reached his ears. His eyes were on the black hull of the ship with its brilliant lights duplicated in the shimmering moonlit water.

Derwent helped her to step out of the launch on to the platform at the bottom of the gangway. Colonel Orban watching with uneasy anticipation for their return had the supreme satisfaction of seeing his daughter come on board with Rivenhall by her side and Derwent close behind. Their host was lost in the darkness of the launch, where he was occupied in paying the boatmen.

CHAPTER V

MRS. ORBAN'S keen eyes detected the jewelled amulet directly her daughter entered the cabin. She asked if Delia had bought it. When she heard that it was a gift and had been presented by Captain Hassan she looked grave.

"Do you know what you are doing, Delia?" she asked with unusual seriousness. "You are playing with fire."

"Am I? I'm sorry; I didn't think. Somehow after I had accepted it I felt that I hadn't done the right thing," she answered, recalling the expression she had seen on Rivenhall's face. "Shall I give it back to him?"

"No; you can't exactly do that. It is no use trying to put back an egg when you have robbed the nest."

"There is nothing to be done?"

"Nothing." Her mother paused. Dell was peculiar; she could not be driven on the curb. Her father's heavy touch often sent her in the opposite direction to his expressed wishes. "I must leave you to manage these—friendships may I call them?—for yourself. Shall we put personality aside and discuss things generally? Between mixed races love is impossible. It is more than that; it is sheer madness. As for marriage it is outrageous and"—she hesitated; it went against the grain to have to say it, but she felt that half measures were useless, and she continued—"the children are stamped with the stain of their birth; a stain that can never be eradicated."

Dell was silent; she knew that her mother spoke the truth. Mrs. Orban went on—

“Your father has suggested more than once that you and I should change places at dinner.”

“No, mother, that would be treating Captain Hassan and me like a couple of children.”

“Exactly so. Then I leave it to you to steer a safe course without hurting his feelings or losing your own self-respect. If you find yourself in difficulties you must come to me.”

Mrs. Orban looked at her, wondering if she was doing wrong to trust to the girl's judgment. Delia did not see the doubt. She kissed her mother warmly.

“Good old Mum! How wise you are! Now I must get on with my dressing. By-the-by, shall I wear this?”

She held up the pendant, and Mrs. Orban looked at it more closely.

“It's a beautiful piece of workmanship and the rubies are very fine. Yes, by all means wear it. It is the only way of treating the incident.”

At dinner, Mrs. Orban, leaning forward, spoke to Hassan across Derwent and her daughter.

“How kind of you to give Miss Orban that pretty charm, Captain Hassan! Do you believe in charms?”

Hitherto he had not spoken. He had recovered his balance to a great extent, and reason had said much the same to him as Mrs. Orban had said to Dell, it was dangerous to play with fire. He welcomed the easy reassuring words and replied at once to her question.

“My people believe in them.”

“Then, of course, you do also. I think that if charms are to have any effect at all on our destiny, faith in them is absolutely necessary. I'm afraid I haven't sufficient faith to bring me under the influence of amulets or omens. Will the charm you have given my daughter guard her against illness and accident?”

“The Egyptian of whom I bought it assured me

that the virtue of this particular amulet is to bring the wearer wealth and happiness."

"Oh! how delightful!" exclaimed Dell. "I shall wear it always, Captain Hassan!"

"And if it fails, of course you must give him beans the next time you see him," said Derwent, laughing at his friend's serious expression. "Hassan! I wouldn't be in your shoes for a good deal! In a way you've made yourself responsible for Miss Orban's happiness and good fortune. Tell us, Miss Orban, what would give you the greatest happiness? Now, truthfully! Chocolates or a flying machine? Hassan is bound to see that you are provided with it!"

Somehow under cover of the friendly trivial banter Hassan felt that he was fast recovering his normal mental condition. The little episode in the boat became more and more of the nature of a dream seen through the atmosphere of fun and chaff. Again he marvelled at the skilful management of the men and women about him in preserving the balance of their friendly intercourse. There was so much freedom, and yet the relationship between them all was scrupulously kept within certain limits. It was always so. When he had been a visitor at the houses of his school or college friends he had found the same even unemotional level. No tempers were lost; no extravagant displays of emotion, such as he was accustomed to see as a child among the women in his father's harem, were exhibited; yet for all that he was aware that the people about him felt strongly, could be ruffled in their tempers, displeased or otherwise moved to hearty laughter or real tears.

Dell did not betray the trust her mother placed in her. If Hassan had sought further opportunity of pursuing his love-making, he would not have found it. Yet there was no apparent change in cordiality on Delia's part; no drawing away, and what relieved him most, no resentment at his having taken what she might have considered a liberty. If anything she was more genial and friendly than before. She was on

exactly the same terms with Rivenhall and Derwent. Bonchester might have been included in her circle if he had not been so obviously attracted by Betty.

Hassan recognised the clearness of the atmosphere, but could not understand how it had been brought about; nor how it was kept so completely free from emotional storms for himself. Were English women differently constituted from the women of his own country? less emotional? less demonstrative? He looked into Dell's eyes frequently and thought he saw greater depths of possible emotion than he had ever seen in the eyes of the woman of his own race; and yet when it should have shown itself, there was no sign.

He was puzzled, and the closer his observation, the more at a loss he was to comprehend the character of the women of the west.

The Red Sea was steamy and hot; it was a relief when the Indian Ocean was reached. Flagging energies revived and tournaments were continued to the end of the voyage.

The ship was approaching Bombay. Preparations for the land journey were made in the packing of travelling trunks. It was the last dinner they would take together, and although none mentioned the fact the thought passed through more than one mind that some of them might never meet again. Once or twice Dell caught Hassan's eye fixed upon her. She smiled in friendly fashion. Just before they left the table, when the conversation was at its noisiest, she said—

"Will you take a walk with me after dinner, Captain Hassan? I want to have a chat before we part."

"With pleasure," he replied quickly.

They went up on deck as usual and sat down, Colonel Orban occupying his outpost chair as though the enemy was still lurking round his camp. About a quarter of an hour later Hassan came up.

"Miss Orban, you——" he hesitated and she responded at once by rising and moving away with him.

Colonel Orban looked after them, trouble once more

written upon his brow. He made no remark, but during the gloomy silence that followed Dell's departure he prepared himself for the worst. He glanced at his wife in the dim lamplight of the deck. The sight of her unruffled equanimity only served to irritate him. If the catastrophe that he had feared ever since they left Marseilles should befall them, he was convinced that she would reconcile herself to it immediately. She might even come to regard it as having some saving grace about it. She was too fond of comforting herself with the thought that things might have been worse.

Meanwhile, Hassan and Dell strolled along the deck to the point where it ended in a taffrail and a short companion ladder that led down to a lower deck. A couple of donkey-engines had been deprived of their tarpaulin jackets and stood in all their nakedness ready for the turmoil of to-morrow.

"I want to tell you something, Captain Hassan, something about myself," said Dell, as they both leaned on the taffrail and gazed out on the dark waters of the Indian Ocean.

He turned so that he could see her face, and waited for what was coming with a curious premonition that she was going to say something about the parting of their ways for ever. Her eyes were on the horizon which was taking on itself a yellow light from the rising of the moon, the same moon that in its younger period had shone down upon the still waters of the harbour at Port Said.

"I have promised Mr. Derwent that I will marry him."

The words came like a bomb; although why they should affect him thus he could not have said.

"Do you—do you love him?" he asked as he recalled the fact that he had never observed that she had shown any preference for one man more than another.

"Yes," she said simply and with unmistakable decision. "Of that I have no doubt."

"Yet it has not been apparent," he said with

diffidence, as though he were treading on ground where he was not sure of himself.

She laughed softly, not indifferent to the thought that to have noticed as much he must have been observant of her actions.

"Did you expect to see any preference shown—to see me give myself away?"

"I don't know what I expected. I confess that I don't understand you English women. If you had not told me yourself that you loved my friend Derwent and had chosen him yourself, I should have concluded that after all your father had made the choice. You have his approval of course."

"I have not told my father yet."

"Doesn't he know of the arrangement?"

"Of the engagement we call it," she corrected. "I don't think he knows; unless he has guessed at the truth."

"He can't have done that——"

"You think we have kept our secret too well for any one to find it out? Mr. Derwent only spoke to me this afternoon."

"When are you going to tell your father?"

"To-night." There was silence. Her eyes were still upon the rising moon that was beginning to emerge from the level of the sea, a pale yellow globe already showing signs of its waning. She turned to him and met his gaze. "Somehow, I wished you to be the first to know. You are Kenneth | Derwent's friend; you must be mine too, Captain Hassan. By-and-bye we shall meet again at Hyderabad where he is stationed."

She was conscious of a strange kind of regret. If he had been an Englishman——! The words were constantly echoing in her heart. And yet, she told herself over and over again, she was not in love with him. Kenneth Derwent was her choice. Her thoughts went back to Port Said more often than she was aware of. Even now as she looked at the rising moon she could

hear the fussing throb of the launch and see the curved lines of the moonlit ripples on the becalmed harbour. Ever since that night she had been under the influence of the glamour of the East ; and she had responded unconsciously to its exotic atmosphere. From that moment she had recognised in Hassan the representative of the new oriental world that was opening out before her with all its magical allurements. Although she realised the truth of her mother's words, spoken in the cabin on her return from that harbour trip, she could not get away from its fascination. The romance of it was like a short fleeting blossom of exquisite sweetness that had died in its blooming, too beautiful to live, leaving behind it a faint fragrance that could never come into her life from any other source.

Perhaps she found it hard to turn the memory of it out of her mind. Women hug the romance of their youth in their secret hearts to the end of their days. It is the innocent sowing of wild oats, that leaves no stain and brings no blush of shame in its memory. The more impossible the realisation of the dream in that youthful past, the greater is its fascination.

Hassan too was back in Port Said with the swish of the water in his ears and a woman by his side who was becoming too dear. Now she was offering him her friendship, a stone for bread. He believed that she had forgotten the incidents of that evening ; or if she recalled them she failed to understand what they had been to him. It was well that he should not know how he figured as the fairy prince of her romance.

"Yes!" he murmured dreamily in reply to her expressed hopes. "Yes!"

She wondered whether he was assenting to the wish that their friendship might continue ; or whether he was thinking of the preference she had shown in communicating the news to him first.

"You must congratulate your friend and tell him you are glad," she said.

He did not reply, and she searched his face as though

she feared to find something there that would trouble her. Then as he remained silent, she turned towards the rising moon floating over the eastern horizon and said—

“Isn’t it beautiful coming up out of the sea like that! It has changed since——” She checked herself. In justice to Derwent romance must be kept down with a firm hand unless he himself could call it up.

“What ought I to say? I suppose I should congratulate you as well as Derwent. Isn’t that the right thing? Would it be correct to shake hands?”

“If you like, Captain Hassan. It will say more to me than words.”

She put out her hand, the hand he had touched without permission on the launch, and he took it. She felt his fingers close round hers with a quick nervous grip that said much. A faint trembling told her that he remembered; he was not indifferent. She recalled her mother’s allusion to the bird’s nest and her robbery of it; and of the egg that could never be put back. She was not sure that she wanted to put it back; nor that she repented of her crime. The romance of it all swallowed up regrets. She would be sorry if he suffered. All the same she would not like to lose that little bit of experience which lay between them, and would never belong to any one else. As they stood thus hand in hand, the silence more eloquent than speech, they heard Colonel Orban’s voice behind them.

“Delia, your mother wants you.”

She released her hand slowly, lingeringly; and Hassan turned his face to the sea. She understood the message, invented on the spot to take her away from her companion.

“All right, Dad; I’ll come at once.”

She glanced back at Hassan standing there, his arms upon the rail, his eyes on the glimmering water that seethed and hissed as the great black hull cleft a way through them.

"I want to tell you something, Dad," she said as she paced the deck by his side instead of going back to where Colonel Orban had been seated. "I'm engaged."

"Oh, Lord! Oh, Lord! I was afraid it would come to this! Your mother wouldn't believe me! I told her her daughter was courting trouble! Oh! Lord! but this is awful!"

"The trouble will be in leaving you and the dear mater; but Kate did it and she is happy; so I may follow in her footsteps and hope to be the same."

"She married an Englishman, thank God! but you——"

He could get no further. He wanted badly to swear at Hassan; and could have found it in his heart to swear at her if courtesy had not held him tongue-tied. She could see in the moonlight that the blood was rushing to his head and that he was thoroughly miserable. She loved him too well to leave him under a wrong impression that gave him so much pain.

"Yes; I too am going marry an Englishman," she observed quietly.

"What! what! that fellow Hassan isn't an Englishman! He's a yellow Mussalman!"

"Gently, Dad! I can't let you abuse Kenneth Derwent's friend. He is going to be my friend when Kenneth and I are married."

"Kenneth Derwent! God be praised, child! What a fright you gave me!" and the Colonel burst into a peal of laughter that was almost hysterical in its relief.

"Poor old Dad! You raised the bogie in your imagination, and have no one to thank but yourself. I'm afraid, if you ask me, I should say that it served you right. Mother has never turned a hair over me. She could trust me, and so could Kate and the rest. I suppose you never will grasp the fact that your children can grow up and think for themselves. There's Ken looking for me. You can go and tell the news to mother and the rest."

He took his lecture like a lamb, he was so relieved

to find that he was mistaken. When he joined his wife Mr. and Mrs. Westleton were sitting with Mrs. Orban. Almost before he had dropped into his chair, he was availing himself of Dell's permission to make the news known. Mrs. Orban smiled as she heard him say—

“My daughter has just informed me of her engagement to Mr. Derwent. She is very happy.”

The next day there was a dispersal to the four ends of India of the *Aurungabad's* passengers. Colonel Orban with his family went south to Trichinopoly. Derwent and Hassan departed to Hyderabad ; but not by the same train, as Hassan was delayed. The Westletons with Betty went north. Bonchester left a day later, swearing eternal fidelity to the tearful Betty on whom was imposed a year's probation by her guardians. The Roxhams were remaining in Bombay for further orders as the battery was about to be moved ; and the *Aurungabad* began to collect a fresh lot of passengers and a new cargo for the journey back.

CHAPTER VI

THE capital of the Nizam's Dominions is the city of Hyderabad. Outside the city are the English cantonments where a large number of British troops are quartered. Hyderabad itself is walled and the gates are jealously guarded. No one is allowed to enter without a permit, which is not, for the European, easy to obtain. The reason for this exclusion of foreigners is not to be found in any fear lest they should see too much. It is to preserve them from disaster, from insult or violence that might be offered to unprotected strangers. Prevention is better than the necessity for redress. It is best for all parties concerned that sight-seers should keep away from the swarm of bees contained within those walls. The army sitting outside its doors see that the stings of the bees hurt none of the world beyond.

The various British troops, infantry, artillery and cavalry, are quartered at Secunderabad, Trimulgherry and Bolarum. The stations are separated by several miles from each other. In the old days the distance was covered by a wearisome drive in a carriage. Now the motor makes the coming and going scarcely long enough for a man to propose and be accepted.

Secunderabad is a civil as well as a military station; and it was here that Derwent lived. Here too are the Residency, the English club and the houses occupied by the civilians. There is also a large maidan or open space used as a parade ground, and beyond it is a lake.

Between the lake and Hyderabad city is Khairatabad, where the palaces of the nobles stand; and the

Futeh maidan, another open space where the imperial service regiments, the native troops belonging to the Nizam, assemble for parade, gymkhanas and military sports.

The ancestral mansion belonging to Hassan's father was one of the largest houses of Khairatabad. Usually it was closely shuttered with Venetians ; and except for a servant or two passing in and out of a small door in the wall of the garden, it showed no sign of life. This evening it was turned into a fairy palace of coloured lights ; for the son and heir was expected home. He was coming by the mail from Bombay.

The new motor-car that he had sent out beforehand was waiting at the station ; and his half brother, Yasin, resplendent in a long purple velvet coat richly embroidered, and a jewelled turban, paced the platform impatiently as he waited for the train.

Yasin was endowed with a merry temperament. As a boy he was full of mischief, and it had not altogether disappeared with approaching manhood. His mother, stout in figure and of a good-natured placid disposition, divided her affections between her son and Hassan's mother. For the father of her child she had no more regard than a good servant would have for her master. As an inferior wife this Hagar might, if she had liked, have demanded a separate establishment under the same roof ; but she preferred to remain with her mistress.

Since his departure to England as a boy, Hassan had been very little at home. The longest period spent under his father's roof was the ten months' holiday between school and college. On the completion of his education he entered the service of the Nizam ; and at his sovereign's request he occupied rooms in the palace. It had been at the instigation of the late Nizam, the father of the present ruler, that Hassan had been sent to England. That far-seeing prince had felt the necessity of having a man of his own race near him ; a well-born subject of noble birth upon whom he could rely. He wanted one intimately acquainted with English, French

and German, a man of sufficient education to read the newspapers in those languages and give him a clear intellectual outline of what was going on in the different countries; one who was by circumstance beyond the temptations of the salaried native clerk. If necessary he would have to visit the capitals of those countries and pick up further information, which he would communicate confidentially to the Nizam himself or to the prime minister who pulled the strings behind the throne. The choice proved good; and Hassan had not disappointed either his father or His Highness.

Of this design, however, Hassan knew nothing till he returned to Hyderabad. When he joined the Nizam's troops and was made an aide-de-camp with the honorary rank of captain within a few weeks of receiving his commission, he began to understand that the course taken by his father was the result of no chance whim. There was deep design behind it; and Hassan was not at all averse to carrying out that design. Nothing underhand or derogatory to his dignity as a noble was asked of him, and men like Derwent were at liberty to draw their own conclusions. If the English Government troubled itself at all about the matter, it probably approved of the desire of the Nizam to obtain a correct knowledge of European politics.

The employment of Hassan as a kind of confidential private secretary had had a certain effect within his own family which did not concern any one outside that circle. In his absence his younger brother, Yasin, had played the part of son of the house. Now, for the first time in his life since he left the nursery Yasin was deposed, and Hassan was to assume his proper position. Although his rooms in the palace had not been definitely assigned to any one else, it was understood that he was to live at home for the present. A telephone in the palace communicated with his father's residence; Hassan had his own motor, and should he be required at the palace or in the council chamber, he could be there within a short time of the summons.

Hassan's father was of no great age ; but infirmity comes more quickly in the tropics than in a temperate climate, and the Nawab, Cassim ud Deen, was no longer an active man. His hair was white and he wore a long beard that gave him a Jewish appearance. He might have been one of the patriarchs of his own sacred book, the Quran, the venerable Abraham himself. He had adopted no western ways nor fashions. His own dress and the dress of his household was identical in pattern with that which was used by his ancestors. His figure was enveloped in a long coat of pale pink satin heavily embroidered with gold thread. The garments underneath were of the finest muslin delicately embroidered. On his head was the usual turban closely bound in neat folds, a narrow edge of gold marking the line of each fold. A jewel of rare beauty shaped as a crescent and set with a number of diamonds was fixed in the turban. The ornament was of European manufacture, the brilliants having been cut by expert workmen.

There was a feeling of suppressed excitement throughout the house. Groups of men, young and old, hung about the passages and doorways. Servants peeped and listened, appearing and vanishing silently. All ears were alert to catch the sound of the motor-horn and the humming of the engine as it pulled up at the front door ; the door that opened only for the heads of the house or for honoured visitors.

The old man sat upon a chair placed on a raised dais in the durbar hall. There was another chair by his side, gilded and upholstered in precisely the same way as the one he occupied. This was intended for his son, the son of the lady he had honoured by marrying with the shahdee ceremonies ; thus placing her for ever at the head of his harem.

At the end of the hall overlooking the dais was a gallery jealously screened by a lattice of carved wood. It was difficult enough to look down through the closely carved work into the hall ; but from below it was impossible to distinguish anything of the veiled

figures that might be behind it. In the verandahs and ante-rooms opening into the Durbar hall the various members of the household waited, eagerly listening or speaking in whispers among themselves. The electric light was fully turned on, but the burners were subdued by coloured glass shades that shed a soft tinted illumination, in keeping with the innumerable Chinese lanterns. The light was sufficient to show up the tinsel and the real without revealing the difference. The modern paste ornaments of the attendants gleamed with almost as much sparkle and glitter as the marvellous crescent on the turban of the old Prince and the magnificent jewels worn by numerous relatives.

The train was late; but it came at last. Out of a reserved saloon carriage stepped Hassan. His fellow passengers would not easily have recognised the quiet unassuming figure that they were accustomed to see dressed in faultless western clothes cut by London tailors. Those clothes were exchanged for oriental dress and a turban as worn by the Muhammadans of South India. Oriental as they were, however, they showed the hand of the European craftsman. The lower garments, a modification of the ill-fitting Muslim trousers, had been fashioned by the same artist who had shaped the western suits; and though they were of white satin they fitted perfectly and gave dignity to the wearer. A long coat of black satin embroidered with gold and pearls enveloped his figure. It was buttoned frock-coat fashion to the waist just showing the gold sash or cummerbund beneath. Over his dark closely-cropped hair he wore a small white turban of fine muslin in which shone diamonds and rubies set in a dainty ornament wrought by some Parisian jeweller.

As Hassan stepped on to the platform Yasin ran forward and prostrated himself in the salutation that is only rendered by the inferior to the superior. He touched the ground at Hassan's feet with his forehead. The elder brother, the heir of his father, remained passive and upright, accepting the homage as his due.

“Rise, little brother! Praise be to Allah who has brought me back in safety. The family is well?”

He was careful not to mention any by name, that being considered unlucky; but Yasin understood that the person inquired for before all others was the revered head of the house.

“Our honoured father is well in health—as strong as the aged elephant that rules the herd and leads the procession. All that ails him is the anxiety that he feels to let his eyes devour his beloved son. Our mothers are well. They share our father’s desire to see their son.”

A group of Muslim servants were removing the luggage from the train. There was no further necessity for Hassan to trouble himself over the numerous suit-cases and portmanteaus, the sight of which had roused Colonel Orban’s ire. He walked slowly down the platform, Yasin’s hand in his, towards the spot where the motor waited. At the entrance of the station another reception awaited him, first from friends of the family who had heard of his expected arrival, and then from some of the servants and retainers, who had come down to the station to give him greeting.

At length he got away, and the car drove off into the darkness of the night. He caught the gleam of the Sauger Lake and recognised the familiar outlines of the landscape as they sped along. They passed strings of bullock-carts and other native vehicles peculiar to an Indian road. The dust whirled like smoke in the bright light of the motor-lamps; and there was a smell of chillies, turmeric, sandalwood, fried garlic and burning firewood in the air that brought “home” to him before ever he reached his father’s house. It was all so different from the thronged streets of familiar Paris and London; and he looked in vain for the gay crowds bent solely on amusement after the day’s work, that passed gaily along the pavements of the European capitals. Was he indeed satisfied to be back again in the land of his birth? Or were there lurking regrets behind the gladness of his return to the fatherland?

Before he had time to realise the sights and sounds that spoke of home the car drew up before the door of his father's palace. He entered, and was again greeted by salaaming members of the Shahzada's princely household. Together the two brothers walked straight to the Durbar hall, where sat the old man, watching and waiting as Jacob might have watched and waited for Joseph and Benjamin. Yasin would have held back, but Hassan drew him forward by the hand. It was only at the last moment that he relinquished his hold and approached alone to the foot of the steps.

There he prostrated himself before his father as Yasin had made obeisance to himself at the station. Then rising, he stepped up to the quiet dignified figure and kissed the hand held out to him. As he did so the old man in a voice he could with difficulty command called down a blessing from Allah on his beloved first-born.

It was an impressive scene full of colour and magnificence as well as dignity and emotion. The retainers, among whom were many relatives, gathered in a circle round the dais, deferentially silent as father and son exchanged greetings. Men in strange armour stood behind them, their antique weapons gleaming with freshly polished gold, brass and steel. The satin, silk and velvet dresses glittered with gold and silver embroidery and a wealth of beautiful jewellery. With the exception of the son of the house, no one wore black. Every shade of colour was to be seen in that soft illumination, and the same tints glowed with a living light in the innumerable Chinese lanterns hung across the room and down the verandahs and passages.

Again Hassan recalled the countries he had just left, and the social gatherings at which he had been present; the black evening dress of the men varied only with a few uniforms, and the sheen of the satins and silks that draped the women, who often outnumbered the men. He looked round, and a flash of enlightenment told him that it was that very element

which he missed in the crowd. He was given no time for reflection, however. His father signed to him to take the seat by his side. Yasin with the privilege of the younger son stood behind his father's chair, his admiring eyes fixed upon this wonderful brother whose return home they had for various reasons so ardently looked for.

Then followed a ceremonious conversation in tones that could be heard through the hall, the observant company listening as they were in duty bound to do. The old man asked many questions of a personal nature, Hassan answered to his father's satisfaction in general terms, speaking in a loud tone that reached the numerous ears, bent respectfully to catch his replies.

Having assured himself and his household that the heir had done full justice to the princely family of the Nawab Cassim ud Deen in the eyes of foreign nations, and had lived as became one of the nobles of Hyderabad, the Shahzada turned to the waiting groups in the hall and called up the different relatives in the order of precedence. Old patriarchs like himself, middle-aged men and eager youths came as they were bidden, each salaaming and afterwards shaking hands with their future chief.

The ceremonious welcome lasted over an hour. Hassan thought more than once of the reception Derwent had received on an occasion when he had been away from home some time. Hassan had joined him in town and the two had gone down together to Derwent's home in Warwickshire. His father had met his son at the door with a warm but casual welcome and a shake of the hand.

"Hello! Ken! Glad to get you back, my son. Mother's in the drawing-room arranging her flowers. You'll find her there."

Mr. Derwent without pausing went on his way to the stable, where the head groom was waiting for his instructions concerning a new hunter that had lately been purchased. Mrs. Derwent hearing voices came

out and Ken was embraced and immediately released. After a word or two she returned to her flowers. The still waters of the English domestic backwater settled down to their customary calm. Hassan was recalled to the present moment by his father rising. It was incumbent on him to rise too and stand at attention until he was dismissed.

"Your mother is waiting. Go to her room and afterwards Yasin will show you your own. I think you will find everything to your satisfaction. You are to have four rooms on the west side, those that I had when I first married." Seeing a question in his son's eyes he continued, "You will need them when we bring you the wife we have chosen for you."

"Wife? there is no hurry about that, father!" said Hassan impetuously; he was startled at the announcement.

"It is all arranged. For the last three months we have been busy with the preliminary ceremonies. It only needed your return to conclude them."

Hassan was silent. For the moment he felt choked to suffocation. In a vague indeterminate manner he had contemplated the possibility of marriage later on at some indefinite time. He did not reckon on its taking immediate form. An involuntary distaste seized him unaccountably; but he thought it unwise to show what was in his mind.

"Why was I not told of your intentions, sir?" he asked.

The Shahzada raised his eyebrows and allowed a perceptible time to pass before he replied to a question that in his opinion verged on the impertinent.

"It has not been considered necessary to inform young people at once of their parents' intentions. I see no necessity for it in your case, my son. I was betrothed without being consulted, and I never dreamed of disputing the authority of my father to do with me as he willed. He chose far more wisely than I could have done. We hope that we have chosen for you with a

better judgment than you with your inexperience could show."

The dark eyes of the old man shone beneath his white brows as they searched the face of his son.

"I should have preferred to have delayed it longer. There are my secretarial duties to be considered. His Highness will probably require my constant attendance at the palace. If he goes to Simla or Calcutta, I shall have to accompany him as usual——"

His father cut him short with an imperialism Hassan knew of old.

"We have consulted the wishes of His Highness the Nizam, and we have his full approval. He will be present himself at the marriage, a great honour which is very seldom accorded to any of his subjects. He no longer requires you to live at the palace. The necessary leave will be granted, and you will have a few weeks with your bride before you are called upon to take up any duty civil or military. After that the Nizam himself—may Allah send His blessing upon him and his family—will say what your duties are to be."

"I hope I shall be allowed to return to the palace to my former work."

"His Excellency, the Prime Minister will probably see to that. Your rooms have not been given to any other man. It seems, therefore, likely that you will go back. Meanwhile both His Highness and His Excellency thoroughly approve of our choice."

"May I be permitted to know what that choice is?"

"Your mother will explain. I leave everything to her. Now go, my son. It is late; but she will not lie down until she has seen her son and given him her blessing."

CHAPTER VII

HASSAN retired in the direction of the women's quarters. He needed no guide. The way was familiar ; nothing had been altered since he ran along those passages and climbed the narrow dusty stairs as a toddling child. He wondered idly if the place had been swept since those days. What would the trim English housemaid and the smiling, obliging *femme-de-chambre* have said could they have cast their eyes over the floors and walls ! Yasin followed close at his heels. The boy had been unusually quiet in the presence of his father, of whom he stood in some fear. As soon as they were out of the old man's presence Yasin began to chatter.

"Brother ! This is good ! The house has been too quiet without you ! Now if Allah will there will be more to see and hear within these walls."

"What of marriage ceremonies ? Surely they have brought a little life ; the sound of drums and music with plenty of feasting ?" asked Hassan, smiling kindly on him ; though inwardly he was more than a little troubled at the unexpected communication made by his father.

"Ah ! they have been magnificent ; no expense spared on either side ; new clothes ; the resetting of the family jewels and the purchase of new pearls. It is enough to make any one desire marriage."

"My mother is pleased then and your mother is delighted."

Yasin laughed as though he had a joke all to himself.

"My mother gives me plenty of fun though she

does not know it. She troubles herself over omens. Twice has a party been put off because our father—may Allah shower blessings on him—sneezed; and an owl has cried round the house. The Shahzada sneezed because I beat sandalwood powder out of my coat behind him; and as for the owl——”

He glanced at his brother with twinkling eyes.

“You need not go on. You still play the shaitan, little brother! The owl’s name was Yasin,” said Hassan. “It is time they married you. How old are you?”

“Eighteen; my mother has talked of it; but the days have not been propitious. Moreover, your marriage must first be concluded before my father will consent to speak of mine.”

“Apparently my mother has found them propitious,” remarked Hassan with a touch of bitterness; he could not reconcile himself at once to this summary disposal of his person. It would not have mattered if the bridegroom elect had been Yasin or any other young noble who had never spread his wings and wandered away to the magical West; but in his case they should have considered his upbringing and consulted his wishes.

“The Sahiba has many modern ideas although our father does not approve of them. She never troubles about omens and signs. If she had had her way it is probable that she would have consulted you. You were not here, brother, to be consulted,” concluded Yasin as though he had found a satisfactory explanation for their parents’ action.

It was on the tip of Hassan’s tongue to reply that his mother might have written; but he suddenly remembered that, though the Begum had had enough education to read and to listen intelligently to others who read aloud to her, she had never been able to master the art of writing beyond signing her name. The difficulty was that her hand could not be made to travel as fast as her thoughts.

They approached the entrance of the women’s

quarters, and entered the screened gallery that looked down into the Durbar hall. Into this gallery his mother's sitting-room opened. A curtain hung before the door. Yasin gave the customary call, "Hide! Hide!" more in fun than in earnest. A fat jewelled arm came from behind the curtain and swept it back. Yasin recognised it as belonging to his mother. He rushed forward crying, "This way! this way! the young prince comes!" and burst into the room with an elaborate stumble over the threshold. It was received with a shriek by his superstitious mother.

"Ah! stop! turn back, my sons! Allah does not look with favour on this visit. You should have come up the other way and not by this passage. Turn back! and turn away misfortune!" she cried shrilly and in real distress.

"I fear no misfortune, little mother," said Hassan reassuringly. "This is only my brother's fun. Ah! mother!"

He sank to his knee before the stately figure that had advanced silently. Her eyes were shining with a wealth of the maternal love that is common to the whole world.

"My boy! my best beloved!" she murmured over him with many appeals to Allah to preserve him and expressions of gratitude for his safe return.

He rose to his feet and stood before her, the embodiment of strength and manliness. Her heart swelled with pride as she looked him up and down, openly gloating over his personal beauty.

Yasin meanwhile was doing his best to rub in the idea of misfortune which he had suggested.

"That was an unfortunate stumble, mother," he said with a seriousness that entirely deceived her. "And just as my brother returned, too!"

"Oh! sonnie! it means something very bad for the family. By which door did you leave the station?"

He described the exit, solemnly assuring her that he

walked backwards as he came out of it on purpose to turn the luck.

"Aiyoh!" she cried. "And this is Tuesday, the very day when that door should have been avoided! What are we to do? Could anything be more unfortunate?"

"Sister!" said the quiet voice of Hassan's mother. "My son is waiting to greet you."

She forgot the unlucky omens and took the hand held out by Hassan, pressing it to her forehead. Then she cracked her knuckles over his head and poured out a dozen wishes that Allah would bless him and preserve him from all evil. This was only the beginning of the welcome the hareem had in store for him. As his father had called up the men of the family so his mother summoned the women. They all went through the same ritual. He submitted with a good grace; for was he not born to it? Yet he could not help noticing how clammy and nerveless were the hands that touched his. It was the same with the men. He missed the quick confident grip of the Englishman. Now as he repeated the ceremony with the women, he was again conscious of a critical comparison with the women of the West which was not in favour of the inmates of his father's hareem. He missed the warm vitality in speech as well as in touch. His thoughts flew back to the evening on the still waters of the harbour of Port Said, and he recalled the magic contact of palms in the little launch.

Dell's hand was like satin, soft and warm as a sun-kissed peach. The hands that held his own, pressing it in turn to smooth round unemotional foreheads, were like those belonging to some cold-blooded creatures that seemed hardly human. Yet below those depths he knew there lay a fund of emotion not often met with in the temperate West. And the palms of those hands were not rose colour. They were of all shades of dull yellow. Not one, young or old, could show the slightest trace of the alluring tint.

He glanced at their lips. In shape they were perfect, but there again the magic tint was missing, and except where art lent a hand the colour was mahogany. Even the red pigment was not used as the women of Europe use it. It was laid on thickly, bespeaking flagrant art instead of delicately assisted nature. Large lustrous eyes were frequently turned up to his as the heads bent before him ; but they had no attraction for him. The dark paint beneath them was too obvious, too great a contrast to the rose-tinted cheek of the Englishwoman.

"You are tired, my son," said his mother, her quick eyes discerning the fatigue that showed on the face of her boy.

"I shall be glad of a good night's rest," he admitted.

She signed to the crowd of women to depart and they were alone except for Yasin and his mother.

"Sit down and we will have just a little talk before you go to your room," she said, pointing to a low arm-chair near a divan with a pile of cushions. As he took the seat she dropped upon the pillows easily pushing them together till she was comfortable. She asked questions about his life abroad, and concerning the journey out by the big ship. Her questions were not designed, like his father's, to show the magnificence in which he lived among foreigners. They were of a still more personal nature. She wanted to know what women he had met and how he liked them. The maternal anxiety peeped out as he praised the beauty of the English and the vivacity of the French. Had he lost his heart to any of those western witches ? He gave no sign that he had, and by-and-bye she felt more easy in her mind. She longed to tell him what had been done, but did not know how to open the subject in her fear lest he should not acquiesce. He relieved her of the necessity of broaching the matter by saying—

"My father tells me that you have chosen a wife for me. May I know who she is ?"

"She is a daughter of the house of Shah Azim Dowlah."

"How old is she?"

"She is nearly eighteen. It is time she was married. There was delay through illness, and then a difficulty occurred in finding a husband for her of her own rank. It is possible that they waited for your return; and in that they did well."

She watched him closely as she spoke, trying to read his expression. Was he pleased or was he about to rebel? After a short silence he said—

"I would rather have waited a few more months."

"She is a beautiful girl and will bring jewels and money besides a noble pedigree. Your father is very pleased and so am I. We are fortunate to have secured such a satisfactory alliance for you."

Again she searched his face. It was difficult to discover how he took it. He had learned the trick of hiding his thoughts. Now if it had been Yasin, his whole heart would have been poured out in pleasure or discontent on the spot.

"There was no need surely for the ceremonies to be hurried on before my arrival. I understand from my father that everything is so far advanced that the actual marriage ceremony is the next thing to be performed."

"It was her family that hastened them on. They said, and rightly too, that the girl was growing old, and ought to be betrothed and married as soon as possible. The usual age is fifteen——"

"Too young," he said.

"Not with us, my son. It is best for our girls to become wives early, as soon as they have done growing. His Highness the Nizam has interested himself in the alliance. He will be present at the final ceremony, which will take place at the bride's house in a fortnight's time, I hope."

She looked in vain for the expressions of pleasure she had hoped to see, and she was vaguely disappointed. There must be some reason for his coldness. All young men hailed their marriage with delight. She could not understand her son's attitude. Instead of anticipation

mingled with impatience there was a cold curiosity which was uncommonly like actual distaste.

"You propose to bring the bride here in a fortnight's time. Can't you put it off and make it a month hence?"

"It is impossible. The Nizam himself would not approve. If you are married in a fortnight's time you will have leisure to enjoy marriage before you take up your duties again. My son! it is not natural for a young man to look so coldly on marriage. What have they done to you in that far-away country across the black water to make you thus? This is to be the shahdee marriage which will never come again, however often you may take a wife. We have chosen a daughter of a princely house who will be worthy of my place. One day she will be at the head of your house. Allah be gracious and grant you a son!"

He turned to leave her. He was tired and depressed. The journey from Bombay was sufficient reason for his fatigue; but why he should be thus depressed he could not say. Reason tried in vain to make her voice heard. To a man born in his position marriage was obligatory. It was important that he should ally himself with one of the noble houses of Hyderabad; and he ought to have rejoiced that there were no difficulties in the way of bringing it to pass. A daughter of one of the noblest was not always available. In his case she was ready, and her family was as anxious to receive him as his own was to welcome his bride.

Hassan had reached the purdah when he came back into the room.

"I forgot to ask you the name of the bride," he said.

"It is of no consequence, my son. As I have already told you, she is as beautiful as Nourmahal herself. Tall, upright, with a perfect figure, her forehead is high, her face oval. She has long, thick hair in which strings of pearls finer than any I possess are plaited. Her eyes are large and her lips are curved like the wings of a bird in the sky."

"Her name ; what is it ?"

"She is Nissa Bee, formerly a friend of your sister Suffoora. Since your sister's marriage we have seen nothing of her."

Nissa Bee! Nissa Bee! Like one in a dream he recalled the face of the beautiful child he had rescued from the shaitan of his brother's invention. Never had he forgotten the kiss she had given him in her childish generosity and gratitude, nor the endearing terms she had used. Somehow in his mind Nissa was connected with Dell. It was odd that his mother should use that expression about her lips. It had often been in his mind. His mother, misinterpreting his silence, pleaded again for his bride.

"When you are married and hold Nissa Bee in your arms, you will thank Allah again and again for His graciousness in giving you such a bride. Her daughters will be beautiful like herself. Her sons will take after you. Could any one desire more? Are you not pleased and content, my son?" she concluded with a wistful longing in her voice. She was more than anxious that he should be happy in his married life, and that the bride should be happy too; and thus bring peace into their already peaceful house. A new light sprang into his eyes as his mother spoke.

"The choice is all that I could wish. Let the marriage take place as soon as you like. It cannot be too soon for me. I shall count the minutes to the moment when my bride is brought home to my father's house."

CHAPTER VIII

YASIN conducted Hassan to his room where a late meal had been prepared. As the two brothers left the hareem and the curtain dropped behind them, Yasin gave a loud chirrup in imitation of a gecko on the wall. His mother heard it ; and the boy went into a silent fit of laughter when he caught the sound of her exclamation.

"If you don't like the idea of being married—though why you should object I can't think !—I am sure I can get it put off for you, brother," he said as they moved through the dim passages, lighted here and there by a small oil light only. "Mother is always on the look-out for evil omens ; and if they are only multiplied sufficiently, they influence her and the whole crowd of women in the hareem. There are my three aunts and their families and my father's nieces and all the rest. They are as terrified of ill omens as my mother——"

"Let it alone, please. The marriage our father has arranged is quite to my mind ; and I don't wish it put off or delayed for even a day."

"You were not so keen on it when you were speaking to the Shahzada," remarked Yasin, glancing at him with some curiosity.

"I hadn't time to consider whether I liked it or not. Do you remember Nissa Bee and how you played the fool, pretending to be shaitan ?"

"Was she one of the children who used to visit our sister ? There were so many that I can't say I remember which was Nissa Bee. What fun it was to make them scream. I suppose she howled like the rest."

"No ; she didn't cry ; she ran to me for protection,

very excited but too brave to cry. All the same, she was very glad to escape when I lifted her up out of your reach. This is my room, is it?"

They entered a large room that to English eyes would have been hard to describe. Was it a dining or drawing-room, a smoking or dressing-room? It contained a sideboard, two gilded chairs upholstered in scarlet velvet, a dressing-table without looking-glass or toilet cover, and a drawing-room lounge chair covered with rich tapestry. A round table in the centre of the room was laid out with a strange assortment of odds and ends, among which were two musical boxes, a carved ivory comb, a pair of horn-handled game carvers, some small sandalwood boxes and a pewter hot-water jug. Piled in the middle of the table was a dessert service of Worcester china.

Over the table suspended from the ceiling hung a handsome chandelier fitted with electric light. In honour of his arrival every burner was turned on, revealing in detail the chaotic confusion that reigned.

Hassan glanced round at the motley collection of furniture and household accessories not knowing whether to laugh or be annoyed. He was conscious in his criticism that he was bringing a changed vision to bear on the arrangements of his old home, and he was judging it from a foreign standpoint. He recalled having seen in days past the same jumble of European articles at the palaces of other noble families of Hyderabad. At the same time he could not help recognising a certain amount of care and trouble taken by some one who was responsible for the conglomeration. The things had not been brought together haphazard; they had been placed in their positions in entire ignorance of their use.

For all he knew the guiding hand might have belonged to no less a person than his own father; and the thought raised a cloud of difficulty in his already somewhat disturbed mind. The conviction was already forcing itself upon him that drastic alterations would

have to be made. Could they be carried out without hurting the feelings of his father?

He was hurried on by his brother, who was anxious to play the part of showman with a pride that suspected no flaw in the arrangements. The next room opened into the first. It also communicated with the dark passage leading to the women's quarters.

A string of Chinese lanterns hung across each end. Their light was hardly discernible in the glare of the electric burners. In one corner stood the library writing-table which Hassan had sent out for his own use. In another was a wardrobe, its face turned to the wall for some unaccountable reason, and its rugged unpolished back presented to the room. His suit cases, just arrived, were piled in an indiscriminate heap in a third corner. In the fourth were saddles, harness, stable requisites, a case of motor fittings, a bundle of polo sticks, another of golf clubs and a sheaf of pig-sticking spears.

The object that caught his eye immediately on entering, and made him oblivious of all else, was a wonderful bed that occupied the middle of the room. It was an enormous square erection raised on an island platform with two broad steep steps leading up to it. Six gilded bedposts supported a domed canopy of scarlet silk. The bed itself was piled high with five mattresses. On the top of these were a number of pillows. Soft Indian silk sheets were folded and laid by the side of a large rose-coloured eiderdown quilt. The bed was not made according to European fashion; but it was supposed from a Muslim point of view to be ready for use.

On the upper step and round the foot of the bed were more large pillows and cushions, covered with green and yellow silk. These were for the use of his attendants, who were to sleep at his feet.

Mosquito-net curtains hung from the canopy. They were gathered full and fell in folds. The strangest sight of all was the number of rosettes of every colour

under the sun with which the curtains were spotted all over.

The ex-Eton boy and Oxford man stood still and gazed at the erection in dismay. Then he looked at Yasin, who was deeply impressed with the magnificence of it all. The boy's face had assumed an unusually grave expression suggesting awed reverence for the impossible bed, and he answered the glance with the solemn remark—

“Brother ! your bed, your bridal bed !”

“Am I expected to sleep there to-night ?” asked Hassan.

“Certainly ; where else can you sleep ?”

Suddenly the humour of it overcame him. As his college chums would have expressed it, he fairly hooted with laughter. He pictured himself in his silk pyjamas—accustomed to the simple English bedroom with its low neat bed and white sheets—floundering about on that gorgeous pyramid ; which reminded him of nothing else but a gay catafalque.

Yet as his memory reached back across the broad gulf made by prolonged visits to foreign lands, he recalled just such an erection on which his father and mother had slept while he had rested on the cushions below at their feet ; and his ayah had lain near him, hidden underneath the bed. There was nothing ridiculous about it then nor even in the memory of it.

He pulled himself together and wiped his eyes, observing that Yasin apparently saw nothing to laugh at. What was more, the boy seemed distressed at his brother's levity and could not understand what it was that had roused Hassan's mirth.

“Come along, little brother,” said Hassan, moving on to the next room. “Where is the food you promised me. I'm hungry after my journey.”

They passed round the catafalque with its golden pillars, its scarlet canopy and white petticoat of net, and entered a third room. Here they found the marble-topped washstand that should have been in the

dressings-room beyond. It was set out with inkstand and blotting-pad and a tantalus spirit case. Other odd pieces of furniture belonging to dining, drawing-room and library were ranged indiscriminately round the walls.

In the centre stood a dining-table. To Hassan's surprise as well as pleasure it was perfectly appointed and correctly laid. A Muhammadan servant came forward and made a low salaam.

"I am Yusuf, your Excellency's servant," he said in English, a language Yasin did not understand. "I have served English gentlemen and know their ways. The Shahzada, your honour's father, has hired me and two others to serve your Excellency."

"Good!" replied Hassan, much relieved in his mind. "But if you profess to know the ways of English gentlemen, why haven't you arranged the furniture in better order?"

The man lifted his hands in despair.

"They would not listen! His Excellency the Shahzada himself came and gave the orders for the placing of everything, even down to the liquor stand." He waved his hand in the direction of the tantalus. "What could I do, your honour?"

"All right! It's not your fault. We'll soon get things into order. Bring me some dinner and be quick about it." As the man hurried away to do his bidding, Hassan turned to Yasin. "Little brother, I will see you to-morrow. It is late, too late to talk more. May Allah keep you safe through the night!"

Yasin would fain have stayed to see his Europeanised brother eat; but after this definite dismissal he was obliged to go. No sooner had he departed than Hassan called his man in.

"Lock those doors. Now open that portmanteau and give me my dressing-gown."

The turban and embroidered coat were laid aside with something like a sigh of relief, and Hassan in slippers and dressing-gown that hid the white satin lower garments sat down to a plain but excellent

dinner. Twenty minutes later his three servants were pulling sufficient mattresses from the catafalque with pillars and sheets to form a simple bed on the floor, a couch that must serve for one night. On the morrow he would be able to order in from one of the European shops a modern bedstead with the fittings to which he had been accustomed.

The following morning Yusuf brought in a tray of coffee and rolls. Again the quick critical eye of his master noted that everything was correct, and the early morning meal would not have disgraced the best establishment in England.

Hassan sprang from his extraordinary couch and glanced round him. Yusuf had already anticipated his wishes so far as to arrange the dressing-room into a semblance of what it purported to be. A little wicker table placed near the open doorway leading into the verandah was ready for the tray. Near it a comfortable cane lounge was pushed up into the light, making it possible for the master to read if he pleased. Another light bamboo table held the books which Yusuf had unpacked from the portmanteau, and a box of cigarettes. The washstand, no longer masquerading as a writing-table and side-board rolled into one, was furnished with its proper crockery; and a dressing-table with looking-glass was laid out with the toilet fittings of the dressing-bag.

Yusuf held out the dressing-gown for his master without waiting for an order; and as he did so he asked if any message should be sent to the stable or garage. Hassan hesitated a moment and then answered in the negative. There was enough to do at home if he wished to evolve order out of the chaos about him.

"I shall want you and a dozen coolies to help to move the furniture in half an hour's time," he said.

"Very good, sahib," replied the man as he would have answered the Colonel Sahib or any other Englishman.

As Hassan took his *chota hazri* his mind worked

with a scheme that came to him as an inspiration. The suite assigned to him contained four good rooms besides the dressing and bathrooms; and they occupied the first floor of a wing of the palace. They were surrounded on two sides with deep secluded verandahs. A flight of stone steps led from the verandah at one end into the walled-in garden that belonged to the harem. At the furthest corner in the opposite direction was another flight of steps leading down to the kitchens and servants' quarters. A screen wall of canvas jealously shut in the greater portion of the verandahs.

The rooms communicated with each other by doors. There were also doors leading into the passage to the harem by which he and his brother had come from the Begum's rooms.

Hassan knew the suite well. It had not been occupied since his grandfather died, when his father had forsaken it for the larger and more extensive rooms that belonged to the head of the family. He determined to make the two rooms that looked into the harem garden his wife's bedroom and sitting-room. Then came his own dressing-room; and beyond this his sitting-room and dining-room. He intended to furnish the suite throughout in European fashion with English furniture; but his attention was concentrated on the bedroom and boudoir that were intended for Nissa. They should be just what Dell herself would have delighted in, and he would buy everything new and of the daintiest and best. The furniture already provided would do admirably for his own rooms. He could make himself very comfortable at once with a bed temporarily in the sitting-room.

As for Nissa's, he could get all that he required from the shops in Bombay, Madras, and Secunderabad. There was no need to send to England or France. Money was no object. All he had to do was to make choice of curtains, carpets, tapestry, and such furniture as was fitting for an English girl's room.

He remembered on one occasion when he was paying a visit to a friend living in a large house in Scotland, he was given a bedroom that was usually assigned to lady guests. He recalled the daintiness of the draperies ; the pattern of small pink roses linked with delicate wreathings that was carried out in carpet, curtains and the chintz coverings of the chairs. The linen sheets were of the finest and the towels of flowered damask. He saw in memory's eye the duchess toilet table ; its polished inlaid drawers and large looking-glasses with reflecting wings ; the glass cupboard of rare china ; the revolving bookcase filled with alluring volumes ; the little table on which stood vases of flowers ; the lounge chairs and sofas and their pale pink cushions. All should be procured ; and Nissa Bee, his wife, the future Begum, with the curving lips and dancing eyes, should be surrounded with the luxury of an English bride.

Then the fittings of the boudoir were thought out with the same care. The sofas and low easy chairs ; the writing-table ; the carved occasional table to hold art treasures, which he would teach her to value and love for art's sake, should all be provided. He would buy a piano and a player, and show her how she herself could bring forth those strains of music that stir the heart in some mysterious way. He pictured the wonder and delight of the many members of the harem when they should find Nissa herself producing those harmonies of the West ; and her own pleasure in creating that wonder.

And Nissa Bee, when she saw it all and learned from him, her husband, that it was hers, his gift to her alone, what would she do ? Her arms would surely be thrown round his neck as Nissa the child threw them when he delivered her from shaitan ; and she would cry again as she cried then—

“Ah ! my beloved ! my sun ! my moon ! I love thee ! I love thee for it, and I will never forget thee !”

He rose abruptly to his feet brushing away the

dream to busy himself about the reality. Ringing through his mind were his mother's words, "In a fortnight! in a fortnight!" He had only fourteen days to prepare for his bride. Not a moment was to be lost if he wished to be ready.

Crowding in upon his brain came a hundred other suggestions of what he could do to make her secluded life happy and fill it with interest. He would get illustrated books, photographs, models of ships and aeroplanes. Fortunately the rooms were large; but spacious as they seemed in their emptiness, they could not have held the half of what he contemplated buying. The appearance of Yusuf followed by the other servants and a gang of coolies was the signal for a hard morning's work.

For a couple of hours he toiled with his band of assistants, and at the end of the time he had succeeded in sorting his various properties and in getting things into their right places. He sent out to the large European shop in Secunderabad for an English brass bedstead for his own use, which was brought in at once. There only remained his boxes and suit cases to be unpacked, and those could wait. He was not sorry when Yusuf summoned him to his late breakfast set out in a room which was now more worthy of the name of dining-room. He looked round with no little satisfaction as he responded willingly to the call. There was a homely habitable atmosphere which the rooms had never known before, and which he intended they should never lose as long as he continued to occupy them.

He had just dismissed his band of coolies when Yasin came in. The boy looked round in blank astonishment.

"Oh! brother!" he gasped as his eyes searched in vain for the gorgeous catafalque. "Where is the bridal bed?"

"Gone to the devil for all I care!" replied Hassan in English.

Yasin gazed at him in bewilderment.

"I don't understand English ; I don't like it ; it sounds too much like a Kaffir and an unbeliever," he complained.

"I've sent the bed back to my mother, and I've asked her to keep it for you," Hassan answered in Hindustani.

"For me! but that is good of you! Can you really spare it?" said Yasin, scarcely daring to believe in his good fortune.

"I'm delighted to give it to you outright ; I never want to see it again. You're not likely to be married just yet, however, so they will have to store it."

"I shall be ready for it before next year ends," replied Yasin with some pride. "As soon as your wedding is over mine is to be considered. There is a girl in the Sahib Ibrahim's family named Huleema Bee. My mother hopes that the Begum will ask for her for me. I believe she has promised already to do so. The old woman who comes here with her basket of goods for sale was talking of Huleema Bee all yesterday ; so my mother said. Her eyes are like stars ; her neck——"

Hassan broke unceremoniously into this description of Huleema Bee's charms by calling Yusuf. The man appeared, and he ordered his motor.

"Where are you going so soon after breakfast ? it is too early to make a call," asked Yasin.

"To the English shops in Secunderabad. Would you like to come too?"

"I wish I could ; but we are starting in an hour's time for the palace of the Shahzada Syed Ali. They are marrying the eldest daughter. While my mother is with the bride I am to join the big party in the Durbar hall, where the Shahzada entertains. But, brother! about the big bed, with its new mattresses and pillows, and curtains and mosquito netting——"

He looked at Hassan in anxious perplexity, a growing conviction filling his mind that his brother's

action would not meet with approval at headquarters. Hassan swore under his breath in English.

"D——n the bed!" adding in his mother tongue, "Well! what of it?"

"Our revered father—may the Prophet grant him a long life!—will not approve of your having given it to me."

"He won't mind when I explain," replied Hassan carelessly.

"Indeed he will! It was by his orders that the coloured rosettes were made. There are double the number that he had. When he married his father gave him only four mattresses. He has given you five! What will he say when he and the lady mother come to pay you and your bride their visit of ceremony the next morning?"

"Oh! don't worry about that. I've given the thing to you, and it is yours whatever they may say—if you can reconcile yourself to such a monstrous bit of furniture."

"I shall indeed be proud! As for my mother, she will be filled with delight to think that I, the son of your mother's handmaid, should be thus honoured. Five mattresses! six golden posts! a scarlet silk canopy! and mosquito curtains adorned with rosettes of every colour that could be found in the shops!"

And Yasin departed to tell his mother of the noble princely gift that had been bestowed upon him by his too generous brother.

CHAPTER IX

THE Begum was ready to start. She was enveloped in folds of muslin from head to foot, and had made herself into a walking pillar of drapery ; so jealously was her gosha preserved and guarded. Fazeela had followed her mistress's example, and was equally veiled. They had their attendants, also gosha, women of varying ages who had some claim of relationship to one or the other.

The party, with the exception of the Begum, chattered and clucked like so many hens as they found their way, with much shuffling of the feet, to a small gate in the hareem garden wall. Here four closed carriages were waiting, each drawn by a pair of handsome horses, fretting under the restraint of their curbed bits.

The ladies bundled in till each carriage was packed. In the road the procession was joined by three more vehicles containing Yasin and a number of companions, all resplendent in satin, silks, and jewels.

Arrived at the house, which was not half a mile distant, the Muhammadan ladies descended under the protection of sheets held as curtains. They were still veiled, but this was not sufficient. The sheets were suspended by a number of hands with a ceremonious display proclaiming to all who looked on how rigid was the gosha, and how important was the family of the arrivals.

The Begum, led by an elderly woman, was hurried down long dark passages, uncarpeted and unswept, her followers close at her heels. They passed through the hareem door, a heavy barrier studded with nails and

barred by a strong beam of teakwood. At the end of another long passage they arrived at a spacious room that might have been airy if it had not been for its small windows, which were placed high up in the walls near the ceiling. The air was strongly scented with patchouli and attar of rose, and the breath of fading jasmine blossom given off from the numerous wreaths worn by the guests as well as the hostesses.

The room was crowded with relatives and friends of the families, with dancing and singing girls and women musicians, who twanged the stringed instruments and drew from them a melancholy wailing that was in rhythm with the singing. Others beat tomtoms to guide the heavy tread of the dancers who danced when they could find space to display their art.

A large divan occupied the centre of the room, and on the cushion sat the bride and bridegroom. They had been married that morning by the Qazi or magistrate. The bride had taken no part in the ceremony since it was the shahdee rite, which is made by the mother and her lawyer alone with the bridegroom and his parents. The bride had not even been present. Her wishes had not been consulted in the matter, nor had she so far set eyes on her newly-wedded husband. The moment had not yet arrived ; for a curtain was held between the couple as they sat there, and neither was able to see the partner chosen for life.

The bridegroom, a good-looking young man of eighteen or nineteen, was rather enjoying the situation than otherwise. He laughed as the songs and jokes echoed around him. Taking a flower from a basket, held by one of his sisters, he tossed it over the screen. To the stalk of the flower was tied a finger-ring set with diamonds.

"A poor gift ! a poor gift for a bride of such surpassing beauty !" cried one of the girls behind the bride, and she asked in very plain language if he expected a husband's privilege to be granted in return for so small a gift. The flower was tossed back, but

not the ring, which was detached and thrown into the bride's lap.

The bridegroom laughed good humouredly, and choosing a tuberosé lily from the basket, fastened a gold bangle to it. This he flung over the curtain with words to the effect that he was positively dying of love, and would give half his fortune to be allowed to take his bride in his arms that very moment.

The Begum and her party walked up to the bride, and for a few seconds the play with the flowers ceased. She looked at the girl, a child of fourteen, as she sat with her feet tucked under her. Her whole person was loaded with jewels—neck, arms, ankles, hair, and hands. Pearls predominated. A long rope of many strands of seed pearls ornamented with tassels of larger gems was coiled round her slim half-developed body. Diamonds glittered in her ears and nostrils; an emerald necklace hung over her breast, and sapphires and rubies adorned her arms and fingers. Her head was bent and her hands rested limply on her knees.

The Begum put her finger under the child's chin and lifted the drooping face. The eyelids were half closed and the eyes unseeing. Drugs had deadened every sense, and she knew nothing of the orgy of which she was the centre.

"Poor child!" said the Begum more to herself than to anyone present, as her thoughts flew back to her own wedding.

"Why do you pity her?" asked the Nani, who was the grandmother and the ruling spirit of the hareem. She was an old woman who had lost most of her teeth and all pretence to beauty. "Do you want to bring bad luck upon her?" she added sharply. "Allah has been good in giving her a young and healthy husband. There is no reason for pity."

"I was thinking that it was a pity she could not enjoy the fun and play, and take pleasure in those pretty things her husband is giving her."

She spoke with diffidence. It was known that the

Begum was advanced in some of her ideas, which were not approved of by those of her friends, who clung tenaciously to the conservative principle of condemning every innovation however beneficial it might be.

"Enjoy the fun!" echoed the Nani in shrill derision. "A likely thing, indeed! If she knew what was in store for her she would kick and scream and cry like a baby till we were all deaf with the noise; and her husband would run away in very disgust. As it is we have had trouble. Five days ago she cried for six hours on end at the thought of leaving home, the foolish child!"

"That was because she was frightened at the tales she was told of her husband's Nani," said the bride's mother, in whose maternal heart was fostered a ray of pity for her little daughter.

The old woman nodded her head.

"By all accounts she is a terrible old woman who rules her son and grandson with a strong hand. She puts terror in the hearts of every member of the household," replied the Nani with a grin of amusement. "I am as butter compared with her!"

"Is she here to-day?" asked the Begum.

"She is too infirm to leave the house now. As her strength fails, her will becomes harder and she is more difficult to please. Verily the child will learn what sorrow is—until she bears a son to her husband. Then nothing will be too good for her in the Nani's eyes."

The play had begun again, the bridegroom entering into the spirit of it, but the bride remained torpid and propped up with cushions, too intoxicated to sit up.

Sweetmeats of all kinds were handed round, and glass phials of attar of rose distributed. Now and then the dancing girls were given an opportunity of displaying their languid voluptuous movements, their eyes resting on the bridegroom as they swayed and moved their arms in invitation. Then the musicians and singers claimed their share of attention, and a love song was chanted in impassioned language that should have kindled fire in the heart of the coldest misogynist.

As the Begum listened and looked on at the familiar scene with the placidity of one who had long been accustomed to that sort of thing, she thought of her son, her westernised son, and sudden doubts arose. That very day, not twenty-four hours after his arrival, he had asserted himself. He had rejected the bridal bed of his ancestors. Would he tolerate this childish play, coupled with the crude jesting that was going on around her? Would he submit to be teased and inflamed—for it was nothing less than that—by dancing women and songs and by bald jokes that instinctively jarred on her own sense of refinement?

She would have to do her best to persuade him to submit, to conform to the time-honoured custom of his forefathers. He must be married, if he was to please his conservative old father, the Nawab, according to the identical ceremonies his parents had used. It was unavoidable, if only for the sake of upholding the dignity and credit of the family.

A memory came to her out of the past of a gentle Englishwoman, her governess for three years before she was married. She recalled the expression that overshadowed the pale face as she translated in all innocence one of the songs sung by a dancing girl in their presence. The distressed look made a lasting impression as the English lady tried to explain that such coarse words about love and marriage were unfit for the ears of any well-born woman whether of the East or of the West.

The day wore on and the sun dropped below the horizon. The tomtoms still resounded under the unwearied fingers of the beaters, but the songs and dances had come to an end. The bride was roused from her drowsiness, their utmost efforts failing to restore her senses; she was hopelessly under the influence of the drugs. She was lifted in the arms of a strong woman of the household and enveloped in a muslin veil. Her little body was still weighed down with her load of jewels; but these would be presently removed.

Later in the evening she was taken to the house of

her father-in-law and left in the room given up to the son as his bridal chamber. Thither he was presently conducted by a band of friends and relatives who never ceased their chaff until the door was shut upon him. Then and only then was he able to pull aside the veil and gaze for the first time upon the features of his wife.

The Begum gathered her women for the return home, and they were packed in the carriages with the same ceremonious screening. There was much chattering as they drove the short distance, Fazeela's tongue going fastest of all, as she planned the various entertainments that ought to take place at Hassan's wedding. This should be done, and that should be done, with a greater display of magnificence than they had seen to-day. The Shahzada would wish it, and they must all combine in carrying out his wishes to the very letter.

The Begum was silent and thoughtful. If Fazeela had not been so engrossed in her own schemes for eclipsing the magnificence of the family she had just visited, she might have distrusted the silence of her lady. The exclamations of approval and praise that fell from the lips of the rest of the party fully satisfied Fazeela ; and the Begum was left in peace. Her brain was busy with the near future. In a fortnight from that very day her own daughter-in-law would be brought home in like manner.

Some premonition warned her that Hassan would not be satisfied to have the details of his marriage carried out on the lines followed to-day. He would never submit to the joking, the songs and dancing and the prolonged play with flowers and jewels. It would all seem childish and undignified, to call it by no worse name. But what could she do to alter matters ? What good would it be to raise her voice against an institution that was professedly founded upon the teaching of the Quran ? All innovations were regarded as sinful, a breaking of the Prophet's law and savouring of infidelity.

There were times when she was conscious of a wave

of revolt underlying that calm temperament which so rarely showed emotion of any kind. She did her best to submit to what she had been taught to believe was the will of Allah ; but to-day, as she thought of her son, she was conscious of a feeling of revulsion at what she had seen when she connected him with a similar function.

This revulsion had not made itself obtrusive when her daughter was married. Suffoorah herself had desired that everything should be carried out at her wedding as it had been done at the marriage of her parents. Instructed by Fazeela, to whom Suffoorah was much attached, the girl had willingly eaten the drugged sweetmeats made and offered by Fazeela. The Begum acquiesced silently. The intoxicant would never have been administered had it been left to the mother.

The Shahzada expressed his approval of all that was done for his daughter, and commended Fazeela for her care in seeing to it that nothing was omitted. Like every orthodox Muhammadan he hated change of any kind ; he regarded it as a breach of faith, for which he would have to answer to the two dread recording angels of black complexion and terrible inquisitorial blue eyes on the day of his burial. They would enter his grave and he would have to give a true account of himself whether he had kept the Faith of God and His Prophet. If he were unable to render a satisfactory reply, he could never cross the razor-edged bridge leading into Heaven. He would fall headlong into one of the divisions of Hell and suffer torments with the infidels.

As the Begum thought of father and son her heart misgave her. In the re-arrangement of his rooms Hassan had shown himself possessed of a strong will. The removal of the bed, and decided refusal to have it back on any consideration whatever, promised ill for peace when the two men should find themselves opposed. Hassan had inherited his strength of character from his father. His residence in foreign countries and his

European education had served to establish that character, and give it greater force than it would have otherwise possessed had he been brought up at home. The Begum had good reason for her fears ; but she kept those fears to herself and allowed Fazeela to believe that she was carried away by the glamour of all that was planned for the approaching wedding.

Meanwhile Hassan was busy and happy in his quest. No doubts on the score of possible opposition troubled his mind. In the buoyancy of hopeful youth if he thought of his father at all it was with the comfortable conviction that he could easily overrule every objection the old Nawab might make. While his mother was idling the time away at the wedding, his motor passed up and down Oxford Street and Alexandra Road as he visited the shops. He was able to find most of the articles he required for this somewhat hasty furnishing of Nissa's rooms. If he desired later to change anything and replace it by something better, he could do so after his marriage. Backwards and forwards he went with feverish impatience, not content to write an order or send a messenger ; and, as he toiled, his mind overflowed with various lines of thought.

Nissa herself might learn to express a wish and make choice of various bits of furniture that took her fancy. He fully intended to cultivate her taste and to give her an opportunity of exercising it. Under his guidance her character would develop. There was no reason why she should not be a companion as well as a wife. Since his English education had been completed he had recognised certain undeveloped qualities in his mother's temperament, which, if encouraged, might have made her a great deal more to her husband than simply the mother of his children ; but his father had never felt the need of intellectual and sympathetic companionship, and so the qualities had remained latent in the Begum's character.

As Hassan lingered in the verandah of his bride's bedroom and looked out across the secluded garden of

oleander, jasmine, pomegranates and orange trees, he decided to furnish a corner of the verandah with deck-chairs, such as he and Dell used to occupy after dinner on the *Aurungabad*. So would he sit with Nissa, their chairs drawn close together, his hand laid on hers as in imagination he had laid it on Dell's. They would watch the stars as the soft air, laden with the scent of the garden, blew in between the white pillars ; and he would tell her of Dell, and of those far-away towns in the West where women moved freely, full of dignity and grace, among men who respected their every wish. Then Nissa would throw a soft arm about him, and beg him to take her there, and show her that wonderful world of liberty. And why should he not do so later on ?

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"Hello ! Hassan ! How is the world treating you ?" cried Derwent, as he ran across his friend in the china and glass department of a big shop in Oxford Street late in the afternoon.

"Very well, indeed ; and you ?"

"I'm desperately busy refurnishing my house ; I have so little time to give to it ; the office work is a little heavy just now," he explained. "My bungalow is an awful old barn ; not fit for a woman to come into."

A shop assistant brought a Worcester china toilet set and named the price.

"Too dear ! You've already ruined me over the dinner and tea services. I've still to buy glass, to say nothing of odds and ends of furniture."

"It's a beautiful set," said Hassan, taking up one of the ring-trays and examining the pattern of roses linked with delicate trails of ribbon.

Derwent watched him with amusement.

"Not in your line, old man. It's only meant for a woman's dressing-table with all her pins and powder-puffs," he remarked.

"I think I'll have it," said Hassan as a second

assistant came up to take his orders. Then, seeing Derwent's eyebrows raised, he added: "I'm going to be married in a fortnight."

"The deuce you are!" responded Derwent in surprise. "I didn't know that you were thinking of that. Of course it's just the thing for your wife if Muhammadan ladies go in for European things of that sort. Have you written to Miss Orban?"

"Not yet; my father has only told me since my return that he and my mother have chosen a wife for me. The preliminary ceremonies were performed before I arrived."

"Then you personally have not had much to do with it so far. You manage things differently from us."

"Our parents arrange so much. It is custom—and custom is a tyrant," he concluded abruptly with a sudden unwillingness to discuss his private affairs even with an old friend like Derwent.

The Englishman was troubled by no such thing as reserve on the subject. On the contrary, he was bubbling over with his own intense satisfaction at his prospects, and was ready to talk as long as he could get the other man to listen.

"It's a bore not having Miss Orban on the spot to consult with. It leaves me with more responsibility than I like. However, she is very good. She writes every day and explains clearly what she wants and what she does not want. I can't very well go wrong. All the same I am bargaining that I may be allowed to change anything that doesn't meet with her approval."

"You are not in any great hurry, I suppose."

"More than we anticipated at first. The fact is, her father's regiment is ordered to Burmah, and they leave Trichinopoly soon after Christmas. I don't want her to go to Burmah, as I shan't be able to take long enough leave to follow her there. So we've decided, with her people's consent, of course, to be married in the Christmas holidays, when I shall be able to get a fortnight including

the holidays. Then I shall take her down to Madras for a few days and come straight up here."

As they talked, the assistants brought more toilet sets. Some of Japanese make were considerably less expensive than the English china. Derwent chose one.

"I'll have that," he said to the man. "It is exactly what I was asked to buy. Now I must go to the glass department. Come along, Hassan, and help me to choose. If I make a mistake I can lay the blame on some one else."

As they strolled through the shop Hassan asked if he might know what directions Miss Orban had given about choice. They sat down and Derwent pulled out three or four letters, reading parts of them aloud. The other made notes as the clear decided instructions were read out. In the intervals the glass for the dinner-table was chosen. Hassan bought nothing. His own table was sufficiently well furnished already. Much as he hoped for progress and advancement in his wife, he could not, he dared not contemplate the possibility of introducing the social custom of taking his meals with Nissa. It would be as much as he could hope if she could be persuaded to join him in that early morning breakfast in the verandah.

"Come and see my house if you have time," said Derwent as they moved away together. "You may get a hint or two from my arrangements if you really want to furnish your wife's rooms in European fashion. You see, I've been back some days, so I've had time to get something done. Odd that we should both be busy about the same business. I thought I was rushing it, but it's nothing compared with your hurry. You've only fourteen days to do everything in. It doesn't give you time to make up your minds as to what you really want."

"We don't follow the same lines as you do in arranging our marriages. I hold no communication with my wife-elect."

"Then how do you know that she will like all this European stuff that you are buying?"

"She is sure to like it," replied Hassan, again retiring into his shell of reserve as the conversation became personal.

Derwent who was making his way to the door, anxious to get away now that his shopping was done, stopped and looked at his companion. He felt that he was on delicate ground; yet he had something to say which he knew Dell would wish expressed.

"May I give you a bit of advice—you need not take it if it doesn't commend itself to you. Get an English lady to come and live with your wife, and she will show her how to take care of all the beautiful things you're buying. She will amuse her and teach her to be interested in matters that interest you."

It had not been easy to tender the advice, and Derwent was relieved when Hassan responded at once.

"Good! I will; that is to say, if I can find some one suitable. She—she——" he hesitated.

"Yes?"

"I must consider my father's prejudices; she mustn't be a missionary."

"Of course not! You leave it to me. I'll ask Miss Urban about it, and it's quite likely that she may know of some one suitable. She will understand exactly what is required."

They parted, and Hassan continued making purchases, passing from one shop to another till it was nearly closing time. It was not until he returned home that he realised how fatigued he was; but he had the satisfaction of knowing that he had found all the larger pieces of furniture. The details of ornaments and knick-knacks could be attended to later.

CHAPTER X

IT had been Hassan's custom when he was at home as a boy to go to his mother's room after he had had his evening meal. He resumed the habit naturally, and though he still felt fatigued after his strenuous shoppings, he decided to seek her as usual when dinner was over.

A Muhammadan is not troubled by the caste rules which surround a Hindu. He is able to eat food prepared by any cook. He prefers, however, Muslim servants.

Yusuf, to whom had been left the engaging of cook and table-servants, had chosen well. The dinner, served in English fashion, was as good as any to be found on an Englishman's table. There was only one point over which punctilious care had been observed ; that was in the scrupulous exclusion of bacon, lard, or ham in its preparation.

The dinner-table was laid with silver and glass. Four small vases containing eucharis lilies and maiden-hair fern stood in the centre. In addition to the electric light, candles in silver candlesticks were placed at each corner of the table.

Hassan, although he was dining alone, was dressed in European clothes and wore a dinner-jacket. He had just finished when a messenger came to announce his father. He had seen him in the morning, but only for a short time as he was in a hurry to get on with his shopping.

The old man entered walking slowly and with dignity. His dress was less gorgeous than when he had welcomed his son home, but it was none the less

handsome—a dark red velvet coat richly embroidered with gold and a jewelled turban.

Hassan rose at his appearance, and greeted his father ceremoniously. The pair made a curious contrast ; the elder man a replica in every detail of his ancestors for generations back ; the other an example of the latest fashion of the ephemeral West. In three or four years the cut of coat and collar would have passed ; but the dress of the Shahzada would remain unaltered.

The old man walked up to the table, and regarded it with some curiosity. The display of silver and glass pleased his eye though he did not for a moment approve of it. Then he glanced round the room.

"These, then, are the ways of the West ; the ways of the unbelievers," he said slowly. "Be careful, my son, not to forget that there is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet."

"Have no fear for my faith, honourable father. It does not lie in the manner of eating and drinking ; nor is it hidden in the clothes that I wear."

"H'm ! May Allah keep you safe ! Perhaps it is not to be wondered at that the young dog learns new tricks when he wanders into strange countries."

"Will you come into the sitting-room, sir ? and I will tell you what I have been doing to-day," said Hassan, leading the way into the adjoining room.

He pushed forward a chair, and as his father seated himself he signed to the four attendants who had accompanied his father to retire. One of the habits of the household, which Hassan resented strongly, was the spying that went on continually. He could not always see those who were watching ; but he knew enough of the ways of the household to be sure that there were plenty of people on both sides of the house with time and ability to gather information about his movements, and carry the information to the hareem as well as to his father. He remembered how he had been taught to listen and watch, and bear tales—little habits that a healthy school life in England had knocked out of him.

Although the attendants were not visible, he was convinced that half a dozen ears were strained to catch what was passing between his father and himself.

The Shahzada, on the other hand, showed no sign of the same dislike to be overheard. His voice was as penetrating and far-reaching as when he spoke in the large Durbar hall. It seemed as though he wished his conversation to be public.

"You have made many alterations in the room," he remarked, as he examined the sitting-room, his keen old eyes taking in every detail.

"I have arranged the furniture in accordance with what I have been accustomed to, sir, and what I require for my comfort. You sent me to England to learn, and I have learned many things besides what books can teach. You had a reason—a good one—that I might be of use to His Highness. There is nothing to regret."

"We shall know better after your marriage whether any mistake has been made. Your wife has not been educated in English ways. When she was a child, I understand that she had an English teacher for a short time, but the lady became ill, and had to return to England. You must be careful not to fill her head with ideas unsuited to our women."

"I don't see why she should not learn to read and write," said Hassan with a suspicion of opposition about his tone that roused his father's spirit.

"If you put a sharp sword in the hand of a woman, she not only cuts herself but she also injures those about her."

"Possibly—unless she is taught how to handle it properly," said Hassan quickly.

"In which case she might turn it against her superiors. Believe me, my son, education is like a sharp sword in the hands of the women of our race. It can do them no good, and it may serve to knock down and cut away the barriers that we have built up round them under the teaching of the Quran for their

protection. Their sphere is the house; their duty is motherhood, and they should not look beyond these."

"What about companionship? Is one's wife to be nothing more than a brood mare?" asked Hassan, with a touch of indignation in his voice.

It did not escape his father's ears. The old man raised his voice as if he were delivering an address from the dais in the Durbar hall.

"The companionship of woman," he said in a tone of finality, "is a snare for the weak and the unwary. She would ask endless questions, worm out secrets, and create mischief on all sides. She would be full of pride at the honour done to her, and so puffed up with self-importance that the end would be terrible."

"What would it be?" asked Hassan. Respect for his father alone stifled his mirth as he put the question. The reply did not lessen his inclination to laugh.

"She would refuse to bear us children, and would demand a liberty of action that would bring disgrace upon the whole of Islam."

The Shahzada bent his white brows till they almost met in horror of the situation he had conjured up. He stared at his son in the full belief that he had represented a state of affairs that was almost unthinkable. No reflection of the same horror was visible on Hassan's face as he busied himself with a cigarette. On the contrary a faint flicker of a smile hovered about his lips as he replied—

"I am not afraid for Nissa Bee. I shall engage an English lady to teach her English ways, such as I have been accustomed to. You need have no fear that she will refuse to be the mother of my sons, or that she will have any desire to break her gosha. I shall take care that disgrace is not brought upon the name I inherit from the honoured Shahzada, the Nawab Cassim ud Deen."

His father uttered a grunt of satisfaction in his long white beard, and his brows unbent, as his son gave him some of the titles he loved.

"You think that the Sahiba Nissa Bee will be satisfied to dispense with the bed to which I carried your mother on our wedding day?" the old man demanded.

Hassan laughed, but made no reply. It was not a question he felt he could discuss with his father. Their ideas had drifted too widely apart.

"Your wedding will be conducted as mine was. You have nothing to say against the arrangements, of course. When I was married I had no voice whatever in my parents' plans. I did as I was told. I hope my son will follow in the steps of his father."

The Nawab fixed a keen, inquiring gaze upon Hassan, who tried to reassure him without committing himself.

"I will do my best to please you, sir. We must do what is expected of us by the two families; but I hope you will make my part in the ceremony as short as possible."

"Our customs cannot be altered," protested the old man.

"I know. We are over-ridden by custom and tradition," responded Hassan with something like a sigh.

"Our customs and traditions were established by the Prophet himself," said the Nawab, his voice once again taking a platform tone. "Let me remind you of the reply of one of his followers. May Allah reward him! He was asked why he rode his camel round a certain stone in the desert. He answered, 'I know not, except that I saw the Prophet of God ride round it.' Keep the story in your mind when you are tempted by the example of infidels to alter that which the Prophet himself laid down in the Quran."

Hassan heard him out patiently and when he had finished drew the conversation into other channels. He wanted to tell his father what he had bought and how much he had spent. On that score the old man was quite complacent, and the subject proved easier to pursue than the first. A little later the Shahzada

retired, followed by his band of attendants ; and Hassan was at liberty to seek his mother.

He found the Begum resting on a nest of cushions which were arranged on a divan that was partly surrounded by Japanese screens. Low tables and easy chairs were placed round her ; and the room, without being Europeanised, somehow had an appearance of comfort and an atmosphere of refinement that was not to be found in the apartments occupied by her husband.

Hassan took the chair that was nearest his mother. He glanced at the attendants, barefooted and silent, but alert with curiosity, who hovered about the entrance and further end of the room.

"Send them away, mother. I am not used to having a lot of servants about, listening to all I say."

"That was what Miss Ward used to say when we talked. The English have a proverb, she told me, about two being company and three none."

She signed to the women to go. Hassan was relieved not to find Fazeela and Yasin there. It would have been impossible to dismiss them in the same manner.

"I am glad you are alone. I want to tell you what I am going to do. I have been preparing my rooms for my bride."

The Begum's eyes shone with pleasure.

"You like our choice, then?"

"I am delighted with it," he responded warmly ; and he told her of his meeting with Nissa Bee years ago. "Is she like what she was as a child?" he asked with the eagerness of a lover.

"She is just the same except that she has grown more beautiful. She was always tall for her age. Now she has developed into a queenly woman as full of grace as she is of strength—so her mother and grandmother assure me."

"Has she still that spontaneous manner? I mean does she speak out what comes into her mind fearlessly?"

"Not exactly in the same childish way. Of course there is now the natural modesty of the girl who is no longer the baby. But have no fear, my son. Shyness soon wears off when a woman has become used to the voice and manner of her husband. I am sure you will not be disappointed."

The Begum turned on her elbow and looked at him as she continued in her slow soft tones.

"You will love her the moment your eyes rest upon her. Be gentle and kind and she will worship you ; and will thank Allah every day of her life for having given her such a noble husband."

He was silent, his thoughts busy with a memory. His imagination drew a vivid picture of a womanly Nissa who might be the very sister of Delia Orban. The watching mother was wise to remain silent while her description of the bride sank in. This daughter who was so soon to enter the hareem might bring happiness or sorrow. If love were engendered all would be well ; but if Nissa were cold or jealous or difficult to please, Hassan's affections would not be retained ; and he would wander off to foreign lands again, lost to his parents who were growing old. He roused himself from his dreams to ask—

"You have been out to-day, mother. Yasin told me he was going with you to a wedding-party. You saw the bride ?"

"Yes ; there was a great crowd in her room."

"Did she seem happy at the prospect of being married ?"

"I'm afraid she was not in a condition to be able to think about it."

"The usual thing, I suppose ; drugged to insensibility."

"It is a pity such practices are considered necessary. I ventured to say as much and gave offence to the Nani, who thought my pity of the bride would bring bad luck. Poor little thing ! She was only fourteen and had been fretting over leaving

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home. I am glad Nissa Bee is older. She is nearly eighteen."

"An age that would be considered young for marriage in England."

"So Miss Ward told me. I was married at fifteen. Your father was twenty years older. He was very good to me."

"You were drugged too?" Hassan asked in a low voice.

"Yes; and I have survived it," she replied with a smile at his serious face.

"Mother, do you think that Nissa could be spared this horrible treatment? May she not be allowed to come to me with all her senses awake, just as she ran to my arms for protection against Yasin's shaitan?"

"If I had the arranging of the wedding it should be as you wished; but I am powerless to interfere," replied the Begum.

Her handsome refined face was clouded by a shadow that might often be seen resting there; but she was not unhappy. Resignation to "kismet" had long since removed actual unhappiness, and she rarely indulged in useless regrets. She was not singular in her submission to fate. The faith of Islam holds many such women as the Begum. They would fain see the bonds of a rigid conservatism loosened, but they fear to begin lest the whole edifice should be shaken.

With regard to her own personal conduct she had never crossed the prescribed line whatever she might have thought. She had always been scrupulously careful to act as she knew her husband would wish her to act. Now that her son's happiness was likely to be involved, it was another matter. The submission which she as a woman had ever been ready and willing to give to her husband, could not be expected of a child whose character had been formed outside the influence of Islamic conservatism. Hassan's voice broke in upon her contemplation of the new difficulties that were springing up.

"You must see Nissa's mother," he said with some impetuosity. "You must beg her as a favour not to use the customary medicine."

"It is the Nani, the grandmother, who will have to be asked. Her voice rules in that house."

"I am glad that we are free from that kind of thing. We have no Nani or Dani to worry us," remarked Hassan.

"Your father's mother was living when I was brought here as a bride. I am glad she lived long enough to hold you in her arms and give you her blessing. She became very exacting before she died, and I was not sorry when she was taken."

"If you think the matter rests with the Nani, you must see her and ask her from me not to give Nissa anything intoxicating. I will take all responsibility."

He gazed at her with an anxiety he could not hide. She was ready to do her utmost to help him, but she felt that it would be wrong to encourage a hope that she believed would not be fulfilled. She knew the family, its pride, its firm adherence to custom, and she correctly gauged the power of the Nani.

"I will do my best; but——" She felt that she could not dash his buoyant hope by her own doubts.

"Yes! yes! Do your very best to persuade the Nani to fall in with my wishes, and tell her I shall be very grateful. If you are unsuccessful Nissa shall be nursed in her room here till she recovers. Mother!" he cried with some emotion. "I will not have a drunken bride forced into my arms. She shall come willingly as the Englishwomen go to their bridegrooms. She shall come as the child came, full of love for me. Think! think what it means! My whole being rises in revolt against it!"

"What will your father say?"

"Need we tell him? Can't you help me in this matter? I know you sympathise; I am sure that you hate the practice as much as I do. Help me, mother," he pleaded in tones that she could not resist; "and

believe me that in doing this we are only acting justly towards Nissa Bee. She will thank you afterwards ; as for me, I shall be eternally grateful."

He bent over her and kissed her. She slipped an arm round him.

"My son ! I will do everything I can to help you," she whispered, her large soft eyes shining with the maternal love that even the cut-and-dried faith of Islam does not attempt to curb and repress. Then she remembered the influence in the hareem with which she had always been obliged to reckon. "There is Fazeela ! I had forgotten her very existence for the moment."

"What of her ?" asked Hassan contemptuously.

"She will oppose us. She made her power to be felt in your sister's wedding, and she overruled all my wishes."

"How can she interfere with me ? I am not her son."

"She will go to your father and rouse him into opposition. And he will listen to her ; for did she not bear him a son ?" The Begum turned to him with sudden passion. "Oh ! my boy ! think before you take another wife into your hareem. Whatever it may mean for the man, the nikah'ed woman binds galling fetters about the feet of the wife of the shahdee."

"I want only one wife and she is Nissa. I am not afraid of Fazeela. Leave her out of the question," he said imperiously, and the watching woman saw the father in the boy. "Let the matter be between you and me. When are you paying another visit to Nissa's family ?"

"In two days' time, when they fit on the wedding dress. The measurements were taken three weeks ago and there was a large party for the occasion with a grand display of fireworks."

"Make a point of seeing the Nani privately. Say that you have a message from me, and impress upon her that it is my desire, my command, that no drugs shall be given. Also speak to Nissa yourself. Tell her

that I remember her as a child, and have kept her in my heart ever since ; that I have never forgotten the sweet words she said as she threw her arms round my neck. Do all you can to put love in her heart, and then she will have no fear."

Again she assured him that she would do her best.

"You must not be disappointed if I fail, however," she added.

"You have seen Nissa, of course."

"Twice only. Last time at the measuring ceremony she stood up like one in a dream, her eyes cast down or closed. They did with her as they would and she was but a doll in their hands."

"Was she drugged ?"

"I think not. She was able to stand alone and she moved her arms in obedience to their directions."

"Did you speak to her ?"

"I said a few words ; but tears fell from her eyes and I was silent."

"Tears ! Oh ! mother, tell her that she will shed no tears with us. All will be joy and pleasure. I have such good things in store for her, the days will not be long enough for her to see all the treasures I am gathering together. Her rooms are to be like those of any English girl ; as beautiful as thought can make them. Not one of His Highness's wives will be able to boast of more pretty things than my own dear wife. Tell her that she, and she alone, will be my Queen, the honoured wife chosen for me by my parents. Never shall another woman come into my life. My beautiful Nissa shall reign alone !"

The extravagance of his speech was as music in his mother's ears. She hung on his words and rejoiced in his love. It awoke memories ; and she lived again in the past when similar words were breathed in her ear by the father of her boy. She watched him as the dream of newly-awakened passion died away. He was leaning back in the easy chair, his eyes unseeing, his

lips parted, as he gave rein to rosy imagination and conjured up visions that might soon be fulfilled.

"Not a word of this to Fazeela," he said presently. "See what you can do with the Nani before Fazeela can interfere. Now tell me how Nissa looked when you first saw her after the proposal of marriage."

"I am afraid you will be disappointed at the little I have to say. I have seen next to nothing of her when I come to think over our meetings."

"You used to have her here frequently when she and Suffoorah were children."

"That was some time ago. When Suffoorah married and left me, Nissa came no more. They said she had an illness ; but it passed and she recovered. From that time I saw nothing of her until your father was approached by the family on the subject of the marriage. When the horoscopes had been cast and other preliminary matters settled, I paid the usual formal visit, taking a gift with me. It was flowers, fruit and a string of pearls for the hair. I asked to see Nissa, who was not among the company present ; and I was taken into an inner room. She was lying down with a very bad headache ; and they had put handkerchiefs soaked with eau-de-Cologne upon her forehead. I asked if she had exposed herself to the sun, and they thought that it must be so, although they could not say when the mischief was done."

"Did she speak ?"

"She thanked me for coming, and clasped my hand with fingers that shook. I could see that it was painful to talk, and what little light there was hurt her eyes. She kept them closed. I kissed her, and she threw her arms round my neck and returned my kiss warmly."

"She did not cry ?"

"Oh ! no, there was no sign of grief. It was just a day's ailment. By the next morning she was quite well again ; so the Nani said to my messenger who went to inquire."

"She is well and strong in health ?" he asked.

"Allah is merciful and has given her a splendid constitution. Except for an occasional headache the Nani declares that she never ails anything."

"I am glad ; I could not have married a weak delicate woman."

The Begum smiled as she replied, "You men are all alike. You crave for youth and beauty and health. You don't trouble yourselves about temper."

"I am sure Nissa is good-tempered," he said with the confidence of the successful lover. "I am counting the hours to the time when my bride will be brought to my rooms. I see her eyes dance with delight and her lips curve into smiles of gratitude over everything I have bought for her. I tell you she shall be a wife to be envied by every woman in the Deccan. After your visit to the Nani I must see you alone and hear what luck you have had. Somehow I feel confident that my request will be granted."

"Allah be good to us and let it be so !" replied his mother.

At this moment Fazeela entered followed by Yasin. Hassan greeted him, and Yasin responded adding, "Do tell us how you got on with your shopping to-day. Have you bought the contents of all the European shops for your bride ? It will take a great deal to compensate for the loss of that fine bed."

Hassan laughed as he admitted that he had spent many rupees and he had been fortunate in finding what he wanted.

"Did you have a pleasant party ?" he asked.

"It was grand ; dancing girls, music, a very good conjurer, some Japanese acrobats, very clever on the bar ; you ought to have been there. There's nothing better to be seen in Europe, I'm told."

Fazeela, who never lost a word of her son's utterance, broke in.

"Ah, sonnie ! the journey was not good. You told me you passed a Hindo widow on the road, and met a man carrying a load of firewood."

"Yes, mother!" replied Yasin with sudden solemnity. "And owls cried on the roof as we sat there looking at the Japanese tumblers. As I came away a cat jumped across my path."

"Aiyoh! that means bad luck."

"And an old horse, worn out with work and nearly dead with starvation, passed in front of our carriage as it crossed the road."

"Abah! may Shaitan take the beast for his very own! Could anything be worse?"

Yasin deliberately winked at his brother as he unblushingly curdled his mother's blood with a fuller list of other ill omens.

"Never mind, little mother," said Hassan consolingly. "Yasin is only inventing them to tease you."

"Inventing, indeed!" she exclaimed angrily. "Yasin always tells me the truth. He never would deceive his old mother, would you, son?"

"Never!" said Yasin with an assurance that made Hassan laugh. As they walked away together after saying good-night, the unlucky chirrup of the wall lizard fell from the boy's lips.

"Shame on you, little brother! You should not play such tricks on your mother. You don't deserve the trust she puts in you."

"It is the only way of keeping her within bounds. She rules us all with a strong hand; and I rule the strong hand with my basket-full of ill omens. But these will be nothing compared with what will come if my marriage does not speedily follow yours, brother."

"I hope you may be as happy as I am in the choice made for you."

"If it is Huleema Bee I shall be happier than you. Am I not the owner of the most magnificent bed in the whole town of Hyderabad?"

CHAPTER XI

THE days passed quickly ; and though Hassan had taken time by the forelock and made an early start on the day after his arrival home he felt sometimes as if his preparations would never be completed in the fortnight. He paid his father a visit every morning. In the evening the visit was returned. The old Muhammadan nobleman always sat in the same place and held forth on the same subject—the keeping of the faith. He spoke in a clear penetrating voice as if he intended the whole household to hear and take warning ; and he laid continual stress on the danger of introducing change, especially where the hareem was concerned.

In vain Hassan argued that he had seen the advantage of education and liberty on Western women. He might as well have talked of the education of monkeys. Those women, held up by his son as examples, were unbelievers and infidels ; their husbands would fill that particular division of hell reserved for infidels. There they would burn to a cinder, only to be revived so that they might endure fresh torments from serpents, scorpions, boiling water, and flames. The old man gloated over the description of the pains destined for unbelievers in the future.

Occasionally Hassan was prompted to speculate on what his father would have said to an English daughter-in-law. Fortunately this catastrophe had been avoided ; and he did not care to think how near the temptation to put it into fact had been. That he had contemplated such a thing in his dreams he would not have denied ; but the temptation was passed ; and he was

thankful that another way to happiness had been opened out.

He did not regret the incidents of the voyage. They had taught him much. The intimacy of the life on board ship was greater than anything of the kind experienced in England ; and in all his wanderings he had never met with a woman quite like Dell. He may have idealised her as he was idealising Nissa. That either might fail to come up to that ideal did not enter his head. As his father expounded his views on the doctrines of Islam, his son's attention frequently strayed ; but it did not matter ; Hassan knew what those views were, and could respond when necessary. He wondered sometimes whether he would one day preach to a younger generation in the same manner. He thought not ; his own children should be educated, boys and girls, and no daughter of his should go to an unknown husband.

In the evening after his father had retired, ceremoniously bidding him good night with the stereotyped blessing, Hassan sought his mother. He looked forward to the hour spent with the Begum. Then it was his turn to talk ; and his mother proved a good listener. Too often there could be no confidential conversation because of the presence of Fazeela ; but now and then it happened that she was occupied with Yasin in her own room.

The boy was to be given an appointment in the Secretariat some time in the new year. Before entering on his duties he was extremely anxious to be married. The Shahzada had acquiesced in Fazeela's plans ; but he had made her clearly understand that Hassan must be settled first. When the marriage of the eldest son was accomplished he would think of Yasin's.

It was not until four evenings had passed that an opportunity occurred for the Begum to relate how she fared in her mission on behalf of her son.

"The Nani was as smooth as the river Moosa in dry weather. She smiled as she listened and made no difficulties whatever."

"Allah be thanked!" was Hassan's comment on this good news.

"When I suggested that Nissa was old enough to exercise self-control and that she was not likely to cry in a childish manner over the change of residence, the Nani agreed. The Bibi, her mother, expressed her approval too, and said that she was glad I had asked for the drugs to be dispensed with. They would not have liked to alter any old custom unless I had suggested it."

"Nissa is pleased to come to us, then?"

"So they all assured me."

"Could you find out if she remembered me?" he asked with the egotism of the veritable lover.

"The Nani said that she had often spoken of you, and she recalls the time when you saved her from Yasin's teasing. It seems that she has treasured that memory just as you have done, and she will never forget your kindness and gentleness. You are lucky, my son, to have a woman like that who is so ready to love you."

"My little Nissa! Is she not the very eyes of me, my own," he murmured, the romantic temperament of the oriental stirred to the depths.

There was silence. His mother was well content to watch her boy, her face shaded by the long narrow hand upon which her forehead rested. His mind was busy with the opalescent visions of the future. It was less than ten days to his wedding. Again and again he saw himself playing fairy prince to his bride; and he pictured her as she turned with charmed and delighted eyes from the gift to the giver, too full of gratitude to express her thanks; too full of love to do more than cling shyly to him and hold him close to her trembling body. Presently his mother spoke.

"Have you ever seen any girl in the Far West like Nissa?" she asked.

He did not answer immediately; his thoughts went back to the *Aurangabad*.

"Yes," he said dreamily. "There was one on board ship. She had Nissa's eyes ; and her lips curved like Nissa's when she smiled."

"Was she beautiful ?"

"She was like a rose gathered from the garden at sunrise."

"Nissa is like a flower that is better than the thorny rose," said the Begum, as a faint dart of jealousy stirred her mother's heart. "Nissa is like the creamy blossom of the champak, full of the sweetest scent and most devoted love. The rose bush holds its treasure guarded by thorns till it fades ; but the champak casts its flowers in their full beauty at your feet, to trample on if you will. That is the difference between the East and the West. Nissa will carpet your path with the perfect bloom of her life, and you never need fear the prick of a cruel thorn. She is capable of greater self-sacrifice than any infidel woman."

"Yet I would have her like that girl in some respects," he replied, unwilling to allow any disparagement ; and, like all men, not in the least comprehending the feminine jealousy that underlay his mother's words. "I would have Nissa a lover of the beautiful in every art, pictures, porcelain, gold and silver, appreciating fine workmanship, and loving all the refined luxury with which an Englishwoman surrounds herself."

"In Nissa, then, you hope to find your English friend."

Her tone roused him at last, and he laughed as he said—

"Why not, mother ? why not ? Where she fails I can teach. I know what I want, and I feel convinced that I shall find it in my wife."

The Begum smiled ; all the same an anxious light crept into her eyes. He was so confident that all would be as he desired.

"We are as Allah made us. Men may try to model and teach ; but they cannot alter the material. However, I have no fear for your happiness ; I am only afraid lest you should ask too much."

"Were you able to tell her what I am doing?"

"I had a very short time with her and there were others present."

"You should have insisted on seeing her alone."

"It was not easy to get the interview at all. They made objections. She was not expecting me; she was not dressed for visitors, and so on. They assured me that it was unnecessary, and that I need not be doubtful about anything. Nissa was not being driven against her will. The Bibi was all for refusing my request; but the Nani, to my surprise, seeing that I was disappointed, took my part. She said if I did not mind seeing Nissa as she was, she would lead me to her room. It was a dark little room at the back of the Bibi's big sitting-room. The reason was plain why the mother had objected. Nissa had a bad cold and she was wrapped in a large chuddah which she had pulled over her head. She was sitting by a charcoal brazier, trying to roast the cold out of herself, poor child. She is so anxious to be well by the wedding-day."

"It will pass off before then. Did she say anything?" he asked, trying his best to hear with his mother's ears and see with her eyes.

"She called me 'mother.' She said, 'I am coming to be your daughter, mother; I am glad to be coming. How good you are to me! I will be the most obedient of children, the most faithful of wives!' 'Are you pleased with your parents' choice of a husband?' I asked. 'I am more than satisfied. Of all men in the world I would rather have Hassan as a husband; for I love him! I love him! Oh! how I love him!' Then she covered her face with her hands for very shame that she had said so much."

For reply Hassan laid his hand on his mother's.

"Yes? Tell me more."

"Then the Nani spoke. 'Are you satisfied too, sister?' she asked; and of course I said, Yes. The Nani continued so that Nissa herself could hear. 'It is your son's wish that no opium shall be given. She is to

go to him as she is with all her senses awake. If he has reason afterwards to be dissatisfied, he must blame himself and not us.' Then she turned to Nissa. 'Speak, Nissa, and assure the Begum sahiba that you are pleased to carry out all the commands of the young sahib.' Then Nissa said in a clear distinct voice; 'I am willing to do all my husband wishes now and in the future. He has only to speak.'"

"That was well. You took the entire responsibility and you were right," said Hassan.

"I hope I was right: In any case you have carried your point; and as the Nani remarked, you will only have yourself to blame if a mistake has been made."

"I suppose I can't escape the ceremony of throwing the flowers and rice," said Hassan.

"They will be disappointed if it does not take place; and so will your own family. After all it doesn't last long; and when it is over the Nani herself will bring Nissa here. I wonder what the old lady will think of all your preparations. She will open her eyes and say that Nissa is a very fortunate girl. You haven't shown me the rooms yet."

"You shall see them before the wedding, mother."

They talked on, never tiring of the subject until it was past the hour for the Begum to retire. Fazeela came in full of fuss at her mistress being kept up so late. What could Hassan have been thinking of to allow his mother to sit up in this way. Ah! well! in another ten days there would be no lingering in the Bibi's rooms with the bride waiting in her own for her groom. Hassan made haste to escape. Fazeela somehow got on his nerves with her foolish chatter and chaff. She brought about a change in the mental atmosphere; and it was as though a soft June night had been suddenly transformed into a blustering March morning, when the dust stung the eyes and the wind chilled to the bone.

* * * * *

It was the morning of the day before the wedding.

Hassan had paid two or three visits to Derwent, and gathered many details of Dell's taste and personal wishes. He examined every purchase, believing that he could detect Miss Orban's influence, and feeling more and more convinced that if Nissa's wishes could be consulted the result would be the same.

There was an afternoon tea-service that took his fancy. In England he always enjoyed the informal gathering round the tea-table; and he wondered if he could teach Nissa to pour it out for him. It was not a difficult accomplishment; but it would be an innovation; one of the changes deprecated by his father; for Muhammadan men and women take their meals apart. He and Nissa might drink tea together in a corner of that secluded verandah where the fragrance of the sun-warmed orange and oleander blossom reached them from the garden below. And what a triumph it would be if they could persuade his mother to join them!

On the morning of the day before the wedding Hassan stood with the Begum in the room he had chosen for his wife's bedroom. White net curtains hung before every window and in the large doorways leading into the verandahs. The venetian shutters of the windows had been thrown open and fastened back, letting in light and air. The verandahs were filled with ferns and palms and a corner was furnished with cane chairs where Hassan might sit and smoke and rest, his wife near him, free to move about or listen as he read and talked.

A latticed screen divided the verandah from the part into which his sitting-room opened, and every precaution was taken to preserve intact his bride's gosha. His own rooms were so arranged that they could be shut off and secluded should she wish to use them. She was to have free access to her husband at all times of the day like an Englishwoman; and he intended to teach her to seek him when she wanted to speak to him. She was not to wait like his mother till she was summoned by her husband; nor was she to beg for

the honour of an interview as though he were granting a favour.

The Begum stood near the handsome toilet table, her eyes filled with wonder as she gazed at the two beds which had taken the place of the banished catafalque. European furniture was not new in the palaces of the nobles of Hyderabad. The prime minister himself occupied a mansion that was fully furnished throughout like an English house. Many of the rooms in the Nizam's palace were also arranged in a perfectly correct style according to continental taste. Hassan was not peculiar in thus breaking away from the old-fashioned divans and rugs and multitudinous cushions that belonged to the Shahzada's time; but where he had advanced was in Europeanising the rooms which were to be occupied by his wife. The Nawab himself had never favoured English furniture either for himself or for any other member of his household. The Begum therefore was astonished at the sight that met her eyes.

From the beds with their embroidered pillow-cases, snowy linen sheets and rose-patterned quilts she turned to the toilet glass and its wings. In amazement she saw herself reflected from all points.

There are many things, small in themselves, that knit together the women of the world in a common sisterhood. One of these is the mirror. African, Asian, American or European, the reflection of her own face and figure holds an irresistible charm for woman, a charm that never fails to attract.

The Begum felt that charm now, and it was not until her son had repeated his request that she moved away from the glass to look at the delicate china on the marble washstand.

When she had made the round of the rooms she immediately returned to the dressing-table for another peep into those wonderful long glasses. Hassan touched the knobs of the electric lights. In a moment she was flooded with an illumination which was like sunlight.

Never had she had such a view of herself before. Her pearls and diamonds shone under the electric globes with a new brilliance. She could see the handsome jewelled ornament that crowned the back of her head, and the pearl tassels suspended at the end of her plaits, as they hung down her back.

"It is wonderful ! beautiful ! How delighted I should have been if your father had made such preparations for me. Nissa Bee is a fortunate bride. May she reward you for all your goodness."

As for Hassan he seemed to be anticipating his pleasure in showing his mother all his treasures. Next to the mirrors the piano-player pleased her best. At first she was startled, but when he explained that there was nothing supernatural about it she gave herself up to the enjoyment of the music.

"How will you keep these rooms in order ?" she asked. "Our hareem sweepers know nothing except how to sweep. Their minds are as empty as a tomtom."

"I have engaged two good women servants, an ayah and a sweeper, who have learned their work in English houses. I shall see that they do everything as it is done in England, and I shall teach Nissa how to look after them. I am glad you are pleased, mother. To-morrow I shall be showing all this to Nissa. Think of the delight that will shine in those beautiful eyes as she sees the things I have shown you."

"And the next day she may come and tell me of her joy ?"

"I will spare her for a short time but not for long. She will be mine, all mine ; mine for ever ; my wife ! my lotus bud ! the mother of my babes !"

CHAPTER XII

HASSAN awoke early on the morning of his wedding day. After ceremonial ablutions with prayer he went to the mosque at sunrise, and made his confession of faith.

"There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the Apostle of Allah."

He repeated the responses in the service conducted by the Muezzin. He made his prostrations and received the salaam or blessing with other worshippers at the conclusion of the service.

"The peace and mercy of God be with you."

Then followed his own private prayers. He added one in which his bride's name was mentioned.

He returned to his home and took his breakfast, reading the English daily paper published in Secunderabad. The morning passed with letter-writing and reading, and he paid his usual visit to his father who preached from the same text with rather more earnestness than hitherto, warning him against innovations and infidelity, exhorting him to study the Quran, and once more detailing the torments reserved for the infidels in the nethermost hell. Hassan's thoughts wandered more than usual. Fortunately the old man was too full of his own sermon to observe the inattention of his son. He took his silence for consent and was pleased with the result of his exhortations.

After lunch Hassan changed his English tweed suit for full Muhammadan dress. Over white silk undergarments of the finest description he wore a close fitting white tunic embroidered in gold and green. A white

turban with diamond and emerald ornament covered his head. His father had sent him a diamond necklace and bracelets, jewels fit for a ruling prince, which he had worn at his own wedding. They were heirlooms of great value; but Hassan refused to put them on. He had learned in the West to look upon such ornaments as belonging to women. The gold-embroidered coat was less to his mind than would have been a neat grey frock coat; but it was an occasion when he must conform to custom as far as he considered absolutely necessary.

The actual marriage ceremony, which was purely civil, took place in a large room in the bride's house where the immediate relations were assembled. The ladies were veiled. The men were in full dress; and the scene was brilliant with jewels and embroidered garments of the richest description. The bride's presence was not required, but both her parents and the Nani were there. The Begum enveloped from head to foot in a thick white veil was led in, followed by a bevy of women all wearing similar veils. The last person to arrive was the Qazi. He also was resplendent in embroidered coat and jewelled turban.

Hassan was required to repeat a confession of faith. The parents on both sides formally mentioned the settlements made on the young couple. The vakils (lawyers) ratified the terms of the contract in the presence of witnesses, and there was a joining of hands over the bargain in which the Begum as well as the Nawab and Hassan had to take a part. Then the Qazi having been presented with his fee departed, and Hassan and Nissa were man and wife.

Hassan had been present at more than one English wedding. As he stood silently looking on after he had finished his part, he thought of the scene in the English church. There the bride was the central figure. She was veiled, but the veiling hid nothing; her features could be distinctly seen by every one in the building. She took her place by her husband's side. She was the centre of admiration and accepted the homage as her

right. When would the women of Islam claim a similar right? At this moment Nissa should be in their midst instead of being hidden in the background, as if she were ashamed of her very existence. Her hand should be on his arm while she, a visible presence, shared the hope and joy of the future with him.

After the Qazi's departure the women retired to the harem, where the ceremony of the flower-throwing was to take place. Hassan had begged that it might be shortened; but here he was destined to feel the power of Fazeela. Not a moment of the usual time given to the ceremony was cut short. She and the Nani took command of the situation, and constituted themselves mistresses of the ceremonies. As Jacob in his way had to serve for Rachel, so Hassan found himself compelled to serve for his bride.

Once he passed his hand beneath the curtain and touched Nissa on the arm. He felt his hand seized by trembling fingers which he clasped closely in his own. Leaning towards the light barrier of drapery that hung between them he said in a low voice, —

"My beloved! are you coming to me as you came when the shaitan pursued you?"

He caught the reply spoken softly but distinctly.

"I am coming, my lord! my husband!"

His heart gave a throb as he heard her voice for the first time after so many years. The fear that after all they had drugged her had been haunting him all through the ceremony. From her response he knew that her brain was clear and unclouded. The knowledge gave him patience to endure the foolish play and the songs and dances that were not at all to his taste.

At length with the setting of the sun and the hour of prayer he was released. As he rose to his feet the spirit of self-assertion prompted him to lay an unexpected hand upon the curtain and toss it aside.

The sight that met his eyes was not what he hoped to see. Nissa still wore the veil. Her head was bent and the drapery of the veil fell to her waist-belt. Her

hands were clasped in front of her with the fingers tightly interlocked. His gifts—sparkling gems, gold ornaments and a beautiful diamond ring of great value—lay in a heap on her lap unnoticed. He was conscious of a sense of disappointment. In imagination he had seen her pick up each flower with its precious jewel and examine it with delight. If he had not heard her clear tones in response to his question he would have been certain that she was drugged.

He consoled himself with the thought that she was only conforming to custom in thus stifling all sign of emotion, and perhaps she was right. There was an exclamation of dismay from the women as he tore down the screen. It was followed by shrieks of laughter as his disappointment became evident. He left the hareem pursued by a chorus of jokes and chaff which were not remarkable for their refinement.

After sunset the Nizam was to pay a visit to the bride's family. He was to be followed by a number of Muhammadan princes. The Durbar hall had been prepared with great splendour, and His Highness was received with due respect. Hassan was presented, and the Royal Ruler was pleased to talk with him a short time, expressing a hope that he would in due course be blessed with a son. When he was tired of the delights of his own hareem, the Nizam hoped he would return to his duties at the palace. His Highness would be glad to have his services again as private secretary; all of which was gratifying to those who heard.

His Highness departed at the end of half an hour, and after the succeeding guests had been presented, Hassan was at liberty to return home, where the usual meal, the late dinner, awaited him. He was informed that the bride would be found in her room at nine o'clock. Declining altogether the offer of his friends to conduct him to the bridal chamber, he departed under a fire of chaff and drove away in his car, thanking Allah that the ceremony was at an end. Once in his own rooms he could ensure the privacy for which he

was longing; and he would be able to lay aside the gold-embroidered coat and jewelled turban.

After dinner, over which he did not linger, he went into his sitting-room, which was next to his wife's boudoir, and directed Yusuf to bring the coffee there. Then dismissing the man with an order that he was to admit no one on any pretext whatever, he sank into an easy chair—to wait. He was not sure that Yasin would not find means of coming with a few chosen companions to see him, according to custom, into his bride's room. It was a relief to have the silence of the night unbroken, except for the distant sounds of music that floated up from the Durbar hall, where the festivities were still in full swing.

A lined bamboo purdah hung in the doorway opening from his sitting-room into Nissa's boudoir. More than once he turned his ear towards it and listened. He could detect no sound. The bride was to be brought through his mother's quarters; and on the stroke of nine the Nani and her attendants would leave by the same way.

Above his writing-table stood a travelling clock. Its clear small gong sounded the hour. Although he had looked at it twenty times since he sat down, and knew to a second the position of the hands, he started violently at the first sharp ting. Springing to his feet he stood motionless for the space of half a minute. The clock relapsed into silence except for the unobtrusive ticking. He moved to the doorway, laid his hand upon the purdah and listened. All was still.

Passing into the boudoir he again stopped. Nothing broke the silence but the whisper of the night-wind among the palms and ferns in the verandah, and a soft whirring of cicalas in the garden below. The room was lighted by a single lamp. He turned off the current.

Then with a sudden swift movement he opened the door and entered his wife's room.

Standing where his mother had stood was the tall willowy figure of Nissa.

The veil was removed and her features were revealed ; the straight nose with its fine delicate nostrils, the beautiful curved lips, the long dark hair in which gleamed pearls and diamonds ; his eager eyes devoured them even though the light was dim. Her neck and arms were partially veiled by a transparent muslin coat that fell almost to the edge of her white silk skirt.

She heard his footstep, and the small hands drew suddenly together as though she were about to lift them in entreaty. He looked for a glance of welcome, but apparently she did not dare to raise her eyes. Nissa the woman was clothed in a new shyness that did not trouble the child. Those eyes were what he most longed to see ; for in them he would find both the woman and the child. In them he would be able to look into the very depths of her heart and read the love that was to be his. Why did she not lift them and give him welcome ? Why did she not run towards him as she had run years ago ? For the moment he almost wished that the imp of mischief, Yasin, was behind her to break the spell of her shyness with bodily fear and send her into his arms.

"Nissa ! my Queen ! my beloved ! Nissa ! come !"

"Ah ! my husband !" she replied in a trembling voice which she could with difficulty command.

The hands unlocked, and fell to her sides ; and her head drooped still lower till he almost lost sight of her features.

"Come ! come ! heart of my soul ! Have no fear, my little Nissa !"

Still she did not move. He could wait no longer to have his dream fulfilled according to his fancy. He strode swiftly towards her, his blood on fire and surging through his veins with a throbbing that was fast undermining his self-control.

She heard his step approach and put out a groping hand, feeling her way blindly as she advanced with shuffling uncertain feet. At the sight of her action he stopped suddenly. His arms, stretched out to receive

her, dropped as if they were paralysed; and the throbbing of his heart ended in one terrible gasp after which it seemed to stand still.

"Nissa!" his voice was tense and low. "Nissa! look up! what is the matter with you?"

She gave a frightened cry and buried her face in her hands. He leaned forward and with one hand he seized her arm, gripping the tender flesh in an agony of dread and apprehension; with the other he turned on all the burners grouped over the dressing-table as he had turned them on for his mother in the morning of yesterday.

Pulling down her hands he lifted her face. Slowly the lids rose and into his face stared the stony eyes of a blind woman. The glorious light that had shone in their depths when she was a child had vanished; the glossy surface had disappeared; they were dull and dead with no more reflective power than ground glass.

"Allah! Merciful Allah! They have given me a blind wife!" he cried in anguish as he stared horror-stricken at the sight.

The flaming passion of love died as the lightning flash is extinguished in the dark thunder cloud. This was not the Nissa of his dreams! This poor maimed creature was not the beautiful woman he had loved! He drew back, shrinking from her with all the loathing of the oriental for the imperfect.

"Mercy! mercy!" cried the girl falling at his feet. "I will serve you as a slave! I will love you as never man was loved before! Ah!"

She choked with sobs; and the poor sightless eyes shed tears that for the pain they brought might have been tears of blood.

Again the groping hands were put forth to feel and touch what was denied to the sight. He drew back involuntarily out of her reach, unable to break the spell of horror that held him.

"Husband! be merciful even as Allah is merciful! Forget my affliction. Let me see with your eyes; let

me feel your arms about me; let me hear you say that you forgive me! I will be good! Indeed! I will be good if you will only let me be your slave."

Hassan was in no mood to forgive or to exercise that quality of mercy she prayed for. Apart from his bitter disappointment he was roused into a whirlwind of wrath that tossed him helpless on its gusts. He had been deceived, tricked. His father and mother had been deceived. They could not have suspected the calamity or they would never have allowed the ceremony to take place. He, Hassan, had been permitted to make all this preparation—a feast for eyes that could not see—without a word, a hint that it was fool's work. Even the mirror in which her forlorn figure was reflected as she crouched in abject misery at his feet was reflecting his folly.

"Have pity, husband! I love you so!" she wailed in between the storms of sobs that shook her. "I will love you as no wife ever loved her lord before!"

The word wife broke the spell. Wife! Did any one dream that he would give his sons a blind mother? The thought was monstrous, revolting, unendurable!

As the hands were once more gropingly extended to touch his feet, he turned away and fled from the room with a cry that sounded the death-knell of his bride's hopes.

CHAPTER XIII

THE Nawab remained with his guests who had been invited for the evening until half-past eight. At that hour he excused himself although it was still early. The guests had all arrived, and he had punctiliously greeted each one with the ceremonious deference that was due. There was no necessity for him to remain while the long programme was being carried out. He called up some senior members of the family, half-brothers and brothers-in-law, and committed the company to their charge, begging them in his clear dominant voice to see that the hospitality of the house was properly maintained. Amid ceremonious salaaming and bowing the old man stepped down from the dais and, passing through the ranks of the brilliant assembly, disappeared behind the purdah that screened off his private apartments.

He was in truth tired, and his eyes ached with the glare of colour and light. A servant relieved him of his gala robes and the turban weighted with jewels that he had worn all day. Wrapped in a warm pushmina dressing-gown he took the light meal that constituted his supper ; and refusing the huqa went straight to his bed.

At the end of the room was a large alcove. Here, screened from draughts was a divan furnished with a number of down pillows. On these he sank with a sigh of relief that the eventful day was over. The servant spread an eider-down quilt over his master, placed the lamp so that its light was shaded from his eyes and put a glass of water within reach. This done, the Nawab gave him leave to go. The man blew up the charcoal

brazier, adjusted one of the screens of the alcove and departed, well pleased to return to the hall; where he joined the outer fringe of the onlookers and watched from a respectful distance the movements of the nautch girls, the wonderful contortions of the hired tumblers, and the thrilling tricks of the fire-eaters.

The Nawab was too full of thought to sleep. Long-forgotten memories crowded thick upon his brain. He recalled that wonderful night in his young life when he visited his bride in those very rooms. From his marriage his mind travelled on to the birth of his son, his first-born and the child of his shahdee wife. He smiled in his old age over the memory of the delight shown by his parents; of his own pardonable pride; and of the never-to-be-forgotten look of deep devotion given to him by the happy mother as he bent over her and the babe.

He thanked Allah, like the good Muhammadan he was, for having spared him to see that son come to manhood and married as happily as he was himself. Might Allah and His Prophet extend that mercy, and permit him to hold his grandson in his old arms, was the prayer he breathed as he lay there.

An approaching step fell on his ear, a hasty impetuous step that belonged to no servant or retainer. He raised himself on his elbow and listened. The step came nearer, and to his intense surprise and astonishment the son, who was so much in his thoughts, fell on his knees by his side.

"My son! my son! what is it? What brings you here at this hour? You should be with your bride. Why have you left her?" said the old man in distress.

For some seconds Hassan's tongue refused utterance, and he was unable to say a word. His head was bowed upon the quilt and his hands convulsively gripped the covering. His father recognised the signs of trouble of some kind and his pulse quickened.

"Speak, my son! Is it well with your bride, the beautiful Nissa Bee? the woman of your desire?"

The Shahzada's beard trembled as he asked the question in apprehension of evil. The mention of her name suddenly loosened Hassan's speech.

"Nissa! my beloved Nissa is gone!" he said hoarsely.

"Gone? your bride gone? I don't understand. Have they failed to bring her to your room? If so, go and fetch her. She is yours by every right."

"She is gone; and in her place they have given me a blind woman, a maimed thing that gropes with her hands and tries to clutch my feet!"

"A blind woman!" repeated the Nawab incredulously. "They would not dare to put such an insult upon us! You must be mistaken!"

"I tell you it is true. Her eyes—oh! dreadful sight!—are dead; she is as blind as if she were dead. Do they think for a moment that I will give my children a blind mother?"

The Nawab drew himself up on his cushions and raised his hands above the kneeling form of his stricken son.

"Never! never! No man of this family has ever brought an imperfect woman into it. May those who have done this thing be cursed by Allah and His Prophet to all eternity! Oh! my son! my son!"

* * * * *

The Begum with a large party of ladies had been watching the festivities from the screened galleries of the Durbar hall. When she saw her husband make a move, she felt that there was no necessity for her to remain longer. Fazeela was capable of playing hostess. She had already taken the lead in most things, and the Begum would not be missed. She therefore crept quietly away without saying a word to any one and slipped into her sitting-room.

Like the Nawab, she was full of memories of the past, and she hailed with delight this opportunity of giving rein to them. Ever since the morning when an elaborate toilet was made for the wedding, she had been

occupied and busy with her many duties, first in the marriage ceremony, afterwards as guest at the bride's house, and now in the evening as hostess in her own house.

She changed her saree of woven gold and silk for one of soft white muslin that she wore at night; then settling herself on her cushions, she let her thoughts wander back into the past. The easy chair used by Hassan when he came to see her was close at hand, reminding her of his visit of the evening before when they had talked later than usual, the subject being Nissa and his preparations for her. It seemed but a few years since he was lying in her arms, a constant wonder and delight with all his baby tricks. How quickly he had grown up and what a son he was to be proud of!

The room was very still, but for all its stillness it did not bring the calm and peace she needed in her weariness. An increasing restlessness had seized her, and she rose from her cushions unable to remain quiescent longer. She passed into her bedroom. The broad couch upon which she spent the night was ready for her; but she turned away knowing that sleep was never further from her eyelids than now.

She wandered back to the sitting-room, pacing up and down in an aimless way, half inclined to summon one of the servants to make her some hot coffee. They were all in the gallery of the hall absorbed in the sights below. It was a pity to call them away; and after all she was not certain if she wanted the coffee. She looked towards the purdah that hung between her room and the passage that led to Hassan's rooms.

It was only half-past nine. By this time the lovers would be together, and Nissa would have seen those wonderful looking-glasses. Better still, Hassan would have seen his wife, a still more wonderful and alluring sight for a bridegroom.

The restless spirit drove her through the curtain. There could be no harm in pacing up and down that

passage into which Nissa's room opened. It comforted her to feel that her two beloved children were close at hand. They were too happy, too engrossed in themselves to hear the soft footfall of her passing feet. Somehow it gave her pleasure to think that she had them all to herself without their knowledge.

The passage was dimly lighted with an oil lamp that had not been extinguished when the Nani left a few minutes before nine. By its light the Begum walked like a sentry, keeping watch and ward before their door.

Suddenly she was startled by a sound. A stifled cry fell on her ears, a distinct wailing followed the cry as of some one in grief. There was no mistaking the sound. It was the bitter sobbing of a woman in trouble. Softly she unlatched the door.

"Hassan! Hassan! my son! What is it? Is anything the matter? Do you want help?"

There was no reply, except that the crying became louder. Taking courage as only a mother could under the circumstances, she ventured to push the door an inch open. Even now she hesitated to intrude, knowing that she was taking an unheard-of liberty.

"Hassan!" she called again; this time louder than before. Receiving no answer she entered. The room was flooded with light and on the floor lay the unhappy, forsaken bride, sobbing with a broken heart.

The Begum hurried to her side. One glance into those streaming eyes revealed the catastrophe that had overtaken the house. Now she knew why the cunning old Nani had been so complacent in agreeing to Hassan's demand concerning the drugs. She needed the co-operation of the unfortunate Nissa to the very end, to preserve the terrible secret and carry out her design.

For a minute anger, suddenly roused and as fierce as her husband's, filled her to the exclusion of every other feeling. The family had been hoodwinked, cheated, treated shamefully. An insult had been put upon her son, upon her husband, upon the whole house.

Was a Muhammadan ever known to take any woman for his wife who was maimed or injured by accident or ill-health, who was blind, deaf or dumb or even lame? And Nissa had been honoured with the shahdee, the most honourable of all marriages, a marriage which should never be performed twice in a man's life! He might marry again and raise up children; but only by a woman to whom he was united in the nikah ceremony. None but the shahdee wife could stand at the head of a household with honour and dignity. No matter how proud and well-born the wife of the nikah ceremony might be, the members of the family would never regard her with the same respect as the wife of the shahdee chosen by the parents of the man and married by the hand of his mother.

As these thoughts flashed through the mind of the Begum she was shaken with anger, and had the Nani appeared at that critical moment, the Begum would have obliged her to remove the impostor. Fortunately for poor weeping Nissa the old grandmother had lost no time in getting away from the house with all her following, resolutely turning her back on the festivities, and pleading that her presence was required at home where they also had a large party of guests for the evening. Moreover, the Begum was in her night garment and alone. She was unable to issue any immediate orders or take any hasty step that night.

As the girl sobbed so piteously at her feet, the motherly heart was touched and her anger gave place to pity.

"Poor child! don't cry! Come to my room and we will see what can be done in the morning," she said.

She turned down the lights and led the blind girl away. The clinging touch of helplessness was like the touch of the helpless babe that stirs every woman's heart to its deepest recesses. The strong maternal instinct went out then and there to Hassan's wife, a precious gift never to be withdrawn.

Suddenly the Begum thought of Fazeela. If she found Nissa there and learned the terrible story of her blindness, the whole house would be raised under a whirlwind of indignation and wrath. Nothing would satisfy Fazeela—and she would assuredly have the support of the Shahzada—but to take the girl back herself to the parent's house, and give the Nani a very rough piece of her mind.

She hurried Nissa to her own couch, speaking in low tones as they moved.

"Hush, hush, dear child. You must not cry like that ; you will be heard." They reached the Begum's bed. "Lie down, Nissa, here, by my side," she said, pushing her gently but firmly into the further corner where she was not likely to be observed, unless Fazeela came close up and peered at them with suspicion. "Draw the quilt over you ; and if you hear any one enter the room, say not a word ; or you will be sent home to your people."

"Ah ! Bibi ! mother ! let me stay with you. The Nani will kill me if she knows that my husband has refused to receive me."

"Then be silent, child, and let no one know that you are here."

The Begum extinguished the light, and the room was thrown into darkness except for the dim light of the floating wick that burned in a niche in the wall.

An hour later Fazeela stood in the doorway.

"Bibi !" she said softly, peering into the darkness. There was no answer. "She sleeps, and I must wait till the morning to tell her how successful the wedding has been."

But the Begum was wide awake, and she had very little sleep that night. The figure lying near her was still shaken with the silent sobbing of a breaking spirit ; and no one with a warm heart like the Begum could sleep in the presence of such bitter grief

CHAPTER XIV

THERE was trouble between the two families. Before the time of the British Raj the trouble would have led to bloodshed. Now it had to be settled by palaver and arbitration ; or, failing a satisfactory agreement, by litigation.

Fortunately matters did not arrive at such a pass. It was greatly due to the moderation and good sense of the Begum that it was so. The Nawab insisted over and over again that the only thing to be done was to send Nissa back to her family without delay.

To this there were two objections. In the first place the family to which she belonged held a high position by birth in the State and in the Sovereign Ruler's estimation. Members of the family were important place-holders in the government. Hassan with a promising career before him could not afford to fall out of favour at court. His father, angry as he still remained, was quite alive to the possible issue of any high-handed action ; he was ready, therefore, to listen to reason. His son had made himself useful in high quarters, he had shown unusual ability in diplomatic affairs, and if he continued as he had begun, there was no reason why he should not some day reach the summit of every subject's desire, the seat of the Prime Minister who sat next to the throne.

A second objection against any summary proceeding of the kind lay in the Begum's personal objection. She urged that she had seen Nissa on three separate occasions, and she had presumably been given every opportunity of discovering the infirmity. Her failure to find it out was her own fault. It was not incumbent on Nissa's

family to draw her attention to it. The Nani would be more than ready to declare that she had truthfully answered every question asked concerning the girl's health. If the Bibi had inquired whether Nissa's sight was good, she would have been told that it was not ; but such a question had never been put. The Begum counselled a waiting policy, and the avoidance of putting an insult on an influential family that might have a far-reaching effect on the fortunes of her son.

She offered to keep Nissa with her—for the present. The arrangement could be altered if it proved unsatisfactory. Already the girl in her sweet resignation to the cruel fate that had overtaken her, had found her way into the Begum's heart, and the course she recommended brought no difficulty.

Fazeela's voice made itself heard. She echoed her master's anger, and clamoured at first for the return of the bride to her people ; but when the Begum in her quiet way pointed out that such a drastic measure would perhaps prove disastrous to the prospects of the eldest son, and indirectly injure Yasin's, she altered her tone and became more reasonable. Yasin was looking forward to a post under the Nizam's government, and on his taking up the appointment he was to be allowed to marry and have a small establishment of his own under his father's roof. As soon as Fazeela understood that she herself would be affected, she made no further objection to Nissa's presence, and began to talk about the advisability of divorce.

The circumstances would allow of divorce ; but no Muhammadan can put away his wife in a sudden caprice—so careful are the followers of the Prophet about the welfare of the next generation. Three months must elapse, during which time the wife must live separately and apart from her husband. At the end of that time if it is found that she is not likely to become a mother, she can be legally put away even though she has committed no fault. Divorce is not common, among Muhammadans. Four wives are permitted by the

Quran ; the necessity of getting rid of one wife before marrying again does not occur ; and if the discarded wife is content to remain a quiet inoffensive member of his family, the man does not take the trouble to free himself.

Again the Begum quietly interfered and made her influence felt. In a lesser degree divorce would put a slight upon the wife's family which might be resented, and she forbade Fazeela, in a tone that she rarely used towards her handmaid and her husband's second spouse, to mention the subject. In Hassan's interests no such step must be taken. After all, she argued, if she was willing to keep Nissa why should any one trouble further about the matter ? As the Nawab's anger wore away and his judgment became cooler, he admitted that his wife was right. He was too proud to let the affair rest without some sort of apology. He sent for his vakil ; and not only was the apology tendered, but the family, in consideration of the Begum's kindness to Nissa, offered a sum of money in addition to the dōwry, the interest of which was to be applied for the special benefit of the useless blind wife who had been thrust all unawares on the Nawab's son.

Thus the difficulty was patched up, leaving nothing but a coolness between the two families. Of the misery brought suddenly into the two young lives nothing was said, because nothing could be done to remove it. Time alone could soften the wound ; but the scars would be left, and for Nissa the outlook was sad and dreary in the extreme.

Hassan himself was sorely hurt and almost as broken-hearted as his deserted bride.

"If only they had told me about it !" he said, once in his father's hearing.

"We should not have proceeded with the marriage, my son," rejoined the old man, quickly. "Your mother's successor cannot be inferior to your mother herself. We must find you another wife who will be in every way fitted to take her position."

"I shall not marry again," said Hassan.

"Perhaps not ; but we shall see. Who knows what Allah may have in store for us ? Not even the Apostle himself," said the wise old Nawab, regarding his son with keen eyes from beneath bushy eye-brows.

It was too soon to advocate anything of the kind ; but in his secret mind the Shahzada determined that there should be a second wife. There must be a grandson before very long, so that his mind might be at rest about the estate. He must be circumspect and not be tempted to make any premature suggestions. It would do later on, he must give his son time to recover from the blow ; a blow to his dignity as well as to the more intimate passions of the heart.

After a couple of days spent in alternate spells of sorrow and anger Hassan became calmer. At first he could not discuss the situation with any one, and he would not allow it to be mentioned in his hearing. The blood of generations of ancestors boiled in wrath at the insult which had been offered. He had no blame for his mother, and would not hear a word of excuse for a mistake that he would not admit. It was not her fault. She had been deceived just as he himself had been tricked, but Nissa must have known all along that deception was being practised, and she had deliberately aided and abetted the Nani in the deception. His anger against her was almost as great as his wrath against her parents.

That she was in love with him did not enter his head, so great was his egotism ; nor could he understand the temptation to which she had yielded. A single life in the harem is one of the direst calamities that can befall a Muhammadan woman. Small wonder then,—if he had only recognised the truth—that the girl should have eagerly grasped at the opportunity to escape the curse of being unmarried and childless.

So strong is the sense of duty towards his children that no Muhammadan would knowingly accept a blind wife on any consideration whatever. Neither birth nor

wealth would tempt him. How could he tell whether the infirmity might or might not be passed on to his children? It would be little less than madness to allow his unborn sons to run such a risk. Nissa was fully cognizant of these sentiments; and in face of them there seemed nothing else before her than a dreary neglected existence in her father's harem, and at his death something worse. She would be at the mercy of her nearest male relative—in his eyes a superfluous useless woman.

The oriental has no reserve; sees no unkindness in throwing misfortune in the teeth of the unfortunate. Every day of her life poor Nissa was made to feel that she was likely to prove a curse rather than a blessing to her people.

When she was told that Hassan's parents had been approached regarding a union between herself and their son, she scarcely dared to believe the good news; and when it became an established fact and the ceremonies were begun, she was filled with joy. It seemed as though the sun had come back into her life. The horrible blankness was gone, and the future promised to blossom out in new and unexpected interests. The edge of memory had sharpened since she had lost the use of her eyes. She could recall every feature of the boy's face—he had been a man in her childish estimation. She remembered the touch of his strong hands as they were clasped about her waist to toss her high in the air out of reach of the shaitan's long claw-like fingers. She felt her kisses returned by those smiling lips that had reassured her, and she looked again into the kind shining eyes that were full of amusement at her foolish fears.

When the Nani explained that the family thought it best to say nothing of her infirmity, she was conscious of a sense of relief. Instinctively she guessed that there would be danger if it were known. It was only natural that she should in her anxiety be ready to lend herself to any deception they choose to arrange. Once with

her husband, hope buoyed her up to believe that his goodness of heart would prevail. With those eyes he could not be so cruel as to spurn her; with that readiness to return her childish kisses, he could not refuse the kisses of a loving and grateful woman. Thus deluding herself into the belief that all would come right in the end, she did her best to carry out the Nani's directions, resolutely putting aside the thought of disaster, hoping and believing that Allah would be merciful, and allow her to grasp the coveted happiness.

Bitter indeed was the failure that had overtaken her. He had rejected her and turned from her with loathing. She could not see it in his face, but she knew it was there. She heard it in his voice; and knew that he would hate her for the deception, and cast her out of his life for ever.

She wept until she could weep no more. After the scalding tears had ceased to flow, she lay moaning on the Begum's cushions shaken by occasional sobs, and longing for the blessed oblivion of death. There was nothing to live for. Why did not Allah in His mercy let her die? Now and then she felt the touch of the Begum's pitying hand on her shoulder, and she heard her voice speaking as she leaned over the pillows. She could only respond by an uncontrollable sob.

On the evening of the second day, the Begum asked her to get up; and taking her by the arm, she assisted her to lift her head from the pillow.

"Listen, Nissa. There has been much talk about sending you back——"

"Ah! no! no! I should die! I would rather die!"

"Quiet, dear child! Keep quiet and listen to what I have to say," said the Begum firmly, as Nissa began to tremble and show signs of renewed weeping. "We have decided to keep you here for the present. You are to live with me."

Nissa groped for the elder woman's hand and pressed it passionately to her lips. The Begum continued—

"You must sit up and take your food. You have given way to grief long enough; your tears must be conquered or you will make yourself ill. I can't have a weeping girl always by my side."

"I will try! I will be good, Bibi, indeed I will!"

"You would like to stay here?"

"Yes, oh! yes! I will give no trouble at all. I can dress myself and take my food if it is put within my reach——"

"There are plenty of people in this house to serve. You shall have all the help and attention you need. What I want you to understand is that you must try to be as cheerful as you can for my sake."

"I promise," replied Nissa.

"And when my son comes to see me as is his custom, you must be silent and quiet. There must be no scene or I shall banish you to another part of the house."

"I promise," breathed Nissa in a scarcely audible voice.

The Begum little knew how the girl thrilled at her words. To hear his footstep, perhaps to hear his voice, was a boon she had not dared to hope for. Ah! Allah was merciful! She could not see him, but she still had the use of her ears. They had grown keener like her memory since this terrible misfortune had overtaken her. The Begum was speaking again—

"If you can exercise self-control, and if you can obey me as you have obeyed your Nani and mother, you shall remain here—at least for three months if not longer."

"And at the end of that time I shall be divorced?" asked Nissa in a low voice.

"That will be decided later on." Then seeing the pain in that sad face, the Begum could not help reassuring her. "I can't say what the Nawab will do nor what his son will wish; but it is probable that there will be no divorce."

"Hassan will take another wife?"

"That again is a matter we have not discussed. There must be a son born some day. The Shahzada will demand it as his right because of the succession."

Again Nissa felt for the Begum's hand.

"Beloved lady, there must be a son born to Hassan or his happiness will not be fulfilled."

Tears of pity welled up into the Begum's eyes. She leaned over the exhausted girl and kissed her.

"Dear daughter! Allah is good. After the rain He sends the sun. Now get up and eat. You have had no food since yesterday. I will lead you to the room where our evening meal is laid."

She took her hand and they moved away. Youth cannot be crushed for ever. Already a ray of happiness had pierced the darkness that over-shadowed Hassan's bride as she counted her blessings.

She was to remain with the Begum for the present.

She was not to be banished altogether from her husband's presence, but might enjoy such crumbs of comfort as she could find in hearing his footsteps and his voice.

And she was to have the love of Hassan's mother.

This the last and greatest benefit was balm to her wounds. She would return that love sevenfold, and show her gratitude in sweet obedience to the Begum's slightest wish.

CHAPTER XV

OF the two Hassan suffered the most—not that his feelings were more acute than Nissa's. He was by nature less able to bear trouble. He lacked the marvellous resignation possessed by the women of the East; and had none of the gentle submission to fate, which after her first paroxysm of grief Nissa showed at the Begum's bidding. This resignation to the will of Allah helped to bring to her a certain calm and peace to which Hassan was a stranger.

After the first few days his mind recovered from the chaotic confusion into which it had been thrown by his mixed feelings of anger and bitter disappointment, and he was able to bring reason to bear on the facts. Over and over again he told himself that he could better have borne her death. He understood the action of Nissa's family. It was the opportunity of their lives to compass the girl's marriage, and they did not scruple to seize it.

Reconsidering the case more temperately he saw that his mother was right in taking part of the blame upon herself. She should have made further inquiries. But who would have dreamed of Nissa's blindness? Both he and his mother had seen her sound and in full possession of her sight as a child. A suspicion that she had lost the use of her eyes was the very last thing to enter their minds.

He found comfort in his father's society. The Nawab arrived at calm reason before his son, and he counselled moderation; but Hassan discovered that beneath that calm lay an iron will. It showed itself

in the determination to exact an apology from Nissa's father. Hassan himself after his passionate outburst and cry for revenge would not have troubled about such a thing. His first mad impulse was to slay some one with the sword ; to take summary and immediate revenge in blood ; but that being denied by law, he asked for nothing instead. What was the use of words ? Excuses only irritated, and an apology seemed a mockery. His one desire now was to get away from the scene of his disillusionment and forget.

His father, however, strenuously opposed his departure just yet. It would give rise to gossip and scandal if the bridegroom left his bride immediately after the marriage. They must all present a brave front to the outer world ; and for the sake of their own self-respect and dignity, if for nothing else, they must hide the skeleton that had suddenly been found in the cupboard. Nissa's family would preserve the secret for very shame. And they must do the same. In the eyes of the public Hassan was still the lucky bridegroom who had won a beautiful girl for his bride, the daughter of noble parents, and richly endowed with money and jewels.

So he continued to occupy his rooms next to those intended for Nissa. Up to the present he had not ventured into the bedroom where he had left his bride like a crushed and broken lily on the floor. He dared not face the scene. At every turn his misfortune would mock him. Each piece of furniture, each ornament, each bit of drapery and upholstery had been chosen with a keen anticipation of the pleasure it would bring to the bright eyes of his memory. Nor had he the courage to give an order for the dismantling and dispersing of his labour of love. The thought of other hands destroying what he had put together was intolerable and hurt his vanity. The two servants who had been hired to act as housemaids were retained ; and under Yusuf's directions they swept and dusted as though the mistress was hourly expected.

Some days after the catastrophe Hassan was sitting at his writing-table answering a letter he had received from Lord Rivenhall. The earl, according to an arrangement made on board the *Aurungabad* inquired if Hassan was able to fulfil his promise to organise a shikar expedition during the official Christmas holidays when permits to shoot were given. No marriage to Hassan's knowledge was then looming on the horizon ; and he had offered to secure the range of one of the best preserves belonging to the Nizam. It still wanted six or seven weeks to Christmas. There was plenty of time to make plans and secure the shooting. By that date his father would give his consent to his leaving home ; and Hassan welcomed the proposition as a plausible excuse for getting away. The answer was just finished in which he said that he would have everything ready, when Yusuf approached with a parcel that had come by registered post.

Hassan signed the receipt and handed it back to the man. His mind was still occupied with the shooting expedition. As soon as he had addressed and stamped his letter he cut the string of the parcel and broke the seals, tearing off the outer covering. Even now he did not anticipate what was coming to light. He opened a hinged wooden box and beheld a photograph of himself taken in Paris which he had sent to Bombay to be framed.

It was set in an oval frame of crystals ; they glittered like diamonds in the dark velvet-lined case. He had intended it for Nissa, thinking how pleased she would be to possess a picture which all his friends declared to be excellent. It should stand on her dressing-table where the electric lights would be reflected in the crystals ; and she would have the double delight of looking at the frame as well as the picture. Another charm would be found in the fact that photographs were one of the innovations deprecated by the Nawab. The orthodox Muhammadan holds that it is contrary to the will of Allah to make any picture or likeness of

created beings. Hassan at the bottom of his heart regarded the doctrine as a superstition; and he had looked forward to combating Nissa's scruples and teaching her to think otherwise.

The sight of the photograph brought back his misery and disappointment with a rush that was a species of mental blow. She could never see it; any more than she could see the rest of the gifts he had provided.

In a sudden gust of anger and despair he threw the picture into the waste-paper basket and thrust the wrappings on the top. He called for Yusuf.

"Is the chauffeur here? Tell him I want the car at once; the open car," he said feverishly.

Hassan had found relief for his mind before now by a rapid drive through the fresh air; and Yusuf, finding that his master always returned the better for the drive, had of late ordered the car to be in readiness at any hour of the day.

"The man is here and the car is ready for the Presence."

Hassan ran down the stone steps that led from his portion of the verandah to the large courtyard below.

"Where is the chauffeur to drive, Huzoor?" asked the armed peon on duty at the entrance, as he closed the door of the car.

"Somewhere! anywhere! out into the country the other side of the town."

The man set the car in motion; they glided along the roads, skirting the great walled city with its quarter of a million inhabitants, its busy streets thronged with people of many nations, with the richly bedecked elephants of the nobles, Arab horses, slow-moving bullock-carts and careless pedestrians. They passed on beyond into the open country, where vegetation grew rankly in places that were watered by tanks and streams. Where water was denied, the ground seemed to produce nothing but a crop of weather-worn boulders. In the Deccan

there are many tales of gallant Rajahs who sought the hand of a mysterious princess with a heart of marble. She turned her lovers together with their followers into stone, and the boulders are said to be their petrified bodies.

Hassan smiled grimly as he remembered the story and thought how his heart had been turned to stone. The air, chilled by rains from the north-east, buffeted him in the face and cooled his fevered blood. It enabled him to think. Something must be done. If his father would not permit him to go away, he must find occupation of some sort if only to take his thoughts from himself.

His eyes rested on the rocky eminences crowned with the fort and temple tombs of Golcondah, in the vicinity of which were the diamond fields that in old times attracted merchants of all nations. The vivid green of the trees, the red and gray of the granite rocks, the palms and thorn bushes, the shining pools of water left by the rains made a glorious picture in the brilliant Indian sunlight ; but it had no attraction for the pre-occupied man whirled swiftly onwards over the unfenced road.

Yes ; he must do something ; he could not wait for the Christmas holidays for occupation. A sudden thought struck him. Why should he not return to his former duties at the palace ? They were congenial as well as familiar. It would be a pleasure to resume them. He pulled the check string and the car stopped.

"Drive to the house of His Excellency, the Prime Minister's secretary," he said, adding the word "quickly !" in his impatience to put his new scheme into execution.

The chauffeur turned and they sped back. After a little delay he was admitted to the presence of the secretary, one of the most influential men in the State. He went straight to the point with a directness learned in the West. He explained his wishes, and was relieved to hear that the Nizam would be glad to have him back

as soon as he could conveniently come. No one had been able during his absence to give the Sovereign the essential points of the news from abroad as he had done. If he could begin by devoting the morning only to the work it would be an advantage. Hassan expressed his readiness to devote the whole day as formerly; and if agreeable to His Highness, he would be in attendance at the palace the following morning.

The keen eyes of the secretary rested on the figure of the young Mussalman as he talked. Was it Western education that made a man indifferent to his honeymoon preferring work rather than play? Or was there some secret trouble? It was not his business to inquire, but his curiosity was roused. He was a reader of men's characters, and he detected the subtle change wrought by disappointment. Entanglement with some European woman and consequent distaste for the colourless child of the hareem, was his comment as Hassan took his leave. It was no affair of his, however, and if it brought the useful military secretary back to his somewhat peculiar and confidential duties with the Nizam, so much the better for the State.

Hassan went up to his sitting-room with a lighter heart. The immediate future with congenial work in prospect followed by a pleasant holiday with Rivenhall, relieved his horizon of some of its gloom. He seated himself at his table to write at once to secure the shooting. His eyes fell on the waste-paper basket. It had not been disturbed since he left. He picked up the rejected case and opened it again. The frame was a beautiful piece of work; it would please his mother, and some day he would give it to her. He opened a drawer in his writing-table and put it safely away.

Hassan had been to see his mother only once since his trouble, and that was three evenings after his unfortunate wedding-day. He found her alone. The interview was short and neither mother nor son ventured to touch on the topic that was nearest their hearts. It was too soon to speak of it calmly, and it was undesirable to

express the anger and indignation that was still smouldering. They had exchanged a few commonplace sentences, and Hassan had departed feeling that his effort to pick up his life on the old lines had been rewarded. The next visit would be easier, and it might be possible to say more.

He allowed a day to elapse, and on the second evening he again presented himself at his mother's door. He entered, never doubting but that he would find her alone.

The sight of Nissa sitting near the divan on which his mother was reclining startled him. He stopped and hesitated under a strong impulse that prompted retreat.

His mother called him by name ; something in her voice compelled him as in his boyhood to obey. He advanced and his eyes dwelt on the figure seated on a low stool. Nissa's hands were folded on her lap, and her face was still and calm although her heart beat wildly beneath her muslin jacket at the sound of his footstep. The eyelids were lowered. He was glad he could not look upon those blinded eyes ; the sight of them would have been intolerable.

His mother spoke in her customary unruffled manner : he withdrew his gaze with an effort, and turned his face to her, moving the chair so that Nissa was not in a direct line of vision.

"Your father tells me that he has received a satisfactory apology from Nissa's family through the vakil," said his mother. "I am not keeping this matter from Nissa. She is one of our family now," she added, as she caught a swift glance thrown by Hassan at his wife.

He made no comment on her last observation but spoke of the action of the vakil.

"For my part I should have let the matter rest," he said. "But since my father wished it, of course I consented. We cannot undo the mischief that has been done."

"That is so. I am sorry for Nissa ; but she will not be unhappy with me," replied the Begum in an unemotional tone.

He noted that a little quiver caught the girl's lip. It was conquered immediately. There was no sign that she even heard what was said, except that her breath quickened, and the pearls lying on her breast rose and fell more rapidly. As long as she did not look up ; as long as she remained quiescent and passive he felt no repugnance to her presence. He was surprised at his own feelings as he realised that the horror of that memorable night was softened. The disappointment remained and it still rankled.

"Then you mean her to live here ?"

"For the present ; unless, of course, her parents express a wish that she should return. Even then I should certainly refuse to comply if Nissa preferred to stay here. She is my daughter-in-law, and as such she is under the authority of her mother-in-law. In the eyes of the world you are her husband and she is your wife, and the disposal of her rests with you and me."

The fingers of the silent figure locked still more closely, and Nissa caught her breath in a voiceless gasp. Hassan rose, he felt he could bear it no longer. With a brief salaam to his mother, he was turning away when the Begum said quietly but in the same tone of authority she had used when he hesitated at entering—

"Greet your wife, my son."

"Salaam, Nissa, may Allah keep you safe !"

"Allah preserve you, my husband !" was the quick response which he caught as he pushed aside the purdah.

Thus the Begum by force of will re-established her son's visits to her on a workable footing ; and placed the estranged couple on terms that were no longer painful to both.

The following evening after his call on the Minister's secretary, Hassan entered his mother's room without hesitation. He had no fear of a scene. Nissa had shown that she possessed self-control, and he need not

be afraid of a sudden and passionate appeal to his generosity. She had been put in her place in the hareem, and she had accepted the position with due humility and becoming meekness. He was satisfied that his mother had done the right thing, and that her action had been the means of preserving peace between the two families. She had acted diplomatically with his father as well, soothing instead of inflaming his anger, and proving herself a power for good in the house, of which he had hitherto had no suspicion.

The person who caused the greatest mischief, and was most difficult to bring to reason was Fazeela. Her peculiar position gave her licence to say more than would be tolerated from the lips of a servant, and she openly opposed the policy of the Begum. In her opinion the family dignity had not been properly upheld or its honour vindicated. With a cruelty that was quite unconscious she would have taken revenge upon the bride herself and made her suffer. It was with the utmost difficulty that she could be restrained from abusing Nissa to her face and heaping bitter reproaches on her head. Nothing but fear of the Nawab kept her within bounds. She had discovered that the old Shahzada and his shahdee wife were able to act together in their son's interests, and that all others, including herself, could be rigorously excluded when it was thought fit as in the present affair.

Hassan carried the case containing his portrait. He took the chair near his mother, who looked up at him with a smile of welcome. She was pleased to see him come in so readily, and sit down as though nothing had occurred to upset a custom that was dear to the mother whatever it might be to the son.

Nissa was seated on her low stool on the other side of the Begum. Beyond was a Japanese screen. Against its pale blue background her profile showed clearly and distinctly. He noted the outline of her forehead, her small delicate nose with its fine nostrils, her upper lip and chin. The face was oval, and the

cheek round and smooth. In her hair jasmine blossoms and strings of pearls were threaded, and she wore one of her new dresses with jewellery befitting a bride. Her eyes were cast down; he was not sure whether they were closed, so completely hidden were they under the long dark lashes.

"I have brought you a little present, mother," he said.

He opened the case and showed her his likeness, the delicately-tinted photograph he had intended for Nissa.

"How beautiful!" cried the Begum, taking it in her hand. "But, my son, what will your father say? He will never allow me to keep it. It is your own face! You seem as though you were just going to speak! How wonderful!"

Nissa's head drooped lower, but she gave no sign of the pain she felt as she heard what the Begum said. At this moment Fazeela came in. She looked over the Begum's shoulder and exclaimed—

"The young Shahzada himself! It is his living self! and the diamonds! They are fit for His Highness's table! But this is against the law of the Prophet. May Allah forgive you, my son!"

"They are crystals, not diamonds," said Hassan, ignoring her reproach.

"They sparkle like the diamonds in the Shahzada's necklace; they cannot be anything else but diamonds," she persisted.

"It is because they are well cut," he replied.

"What a pity Nissa can't see them," continued Fazeela. She turned to Nissa. "Your lord has given the Bibi a lovely gift which assuredly would have been yours if Allah had not deprived you of sight. It is a picture of himself, as he looks in his English dress; as you will never see him," she added with uncalled for severity.

Nissa's hands went up to her face, and a shudder passed through her as she heard the cruel words; but there was no breaking down. True to her promise she

preserved her self-control. The tears that sprang ready to fall were driven back, and the cry of pain was stifled before it could escape.

"That will do, sister," said the Begum, quickly. "Leave Nissa alone. You trouble her when you say such things."

"And wasn't she born to trouble, Bibi? Is it to be hidden from her that she is blind, and that blindness is sent by Allah as a curse?"

"Silence, little mother!" said Hassan, suddenly and with some harshness. "Your foolish tongue wags like the tongue of a Hindu temple bell. There is no sense in it." He turned to his mother abruptly as though he had dismissed the subject with a command, and intended to hear no more about it. "I want to tell you what arrangements I am making for myself."

Fazeela drew away grumbling in an undertone. Nevertheless, she was impressed. Something in Hassan's manner reminded her of the master. It warned her that he would brook even less interference than his father. One day he would be the Shahzada and she a recipient of his bounty. She could ill afford to offend him. She cast an angry glance at the girl on whose account she had been rebuked, and presently she left the room.

The Begum returned the case to him.

"Keep it safely locked away out of sight. Your father, if he sees it, will think that we have broken the law of Allah. Why vex him unnecessarily? He is too old to learn new ways of thought."

He took it, saying that she was right. Then he told her of his intention to resume his work at the palace, where he gathered that he was wanted, and in the official holidays he hoped to go on a shooting expedition with a friend.

Ten minutes later he rose and bade his mother good night. Without hesitating he added immediately.

"Salaam Nissa; the peace of Allah be with you."

To which she made reply—"May the Prophet keep you from evil."

CHAPTER XVI

A FEW days later Captain Hassan's car stood before Derwent's house. It was not a chance call. The Englishman had summoned his friend, saying shortly and without explanation that he had news for him.

Hassan was shown into the large writing-room that opened into the dining-room. Derwent had heard the hoot of the motor, and was standing in the centre of the room waiting to greet his visitor.

"I came as soon as I received your note. I have gone back to my old duties at the palace, and was out at the time your messenger arrived. Is anything wrong?" he asked abruptly, noticing that Derwent was graver than usual.

The Englishman cleared his throat as though he were not quite sure of his command of voice.

"I have had bad news," he said in a low tone. "You will see it in the Madras papers this afternoon or to-morrow morning. There has been an accident—at Trichinopoly. Colonel and Mrs. Orban were motoring out"—he paused for a moment; but making an effort continued—"to the palace at Poodacotta in a car that had been lent. They were going to a party given by the Rajah. Miss Orban was with them."

"She was not hurt, I hope," said Hassan with sudden apprehension.

"Thank God she was not killed. Colonel and Mrs. Orban are both dead, but she escaped with a damaged foot."

"Allah be praised!" rejoined Hassan quickly in his mother tongue.

There was silence ; then he asked how it happened.

"The chauffeur lost control ; the car left the road and got among the rocks and boulders that lie scattered over the waste land near the racecourse.—I don't know if you've seen Trichy.—The car turned over. Miss Orban and the chauffeur were thrown almost clear ; but the Colonel and Mrs. Orban were not so lucky. The car fell on the top of them and death must have been instantaneous. Miss Orban's foot was crushed. The doctors have been obliged to amputate it."

Hassan's eyes filled with horror as he listened, and he marvelled at the self-possession of his friend. Except for the tense low tones and an occasional grip of the fingers, the man before him might have been relating some commonplace incident of everyday occurrence.

"Then she will be lame for life," he said after a slight pause.

"I am afraid so," was the quiet reply.

"And she will never be able to play tennis—or dance—or walk or—or——"

Words failed Hassan as he tried to enumerate the misfortunes that had overtaken Dell. Fortunately Derwent did not understand what was at the back of the other's mind—a sudden feeling of revulsion at the thought of how she was maimed.

"That is so ; but we must be thankful that her life was spared. All yesterday evening and this morning I have been receiving long telegrams from the doctors. It was with the greatest relief that I heard she had gone through the operation successfully. They say she is doing splendidly. She has such courage ! Of course they can't tell for a few days how the shock will affect her, and I shall be very anxious. I know she will do her best to live—for my sake."

"Lame ! it can't be ! lame for life ! impossible !" repeated Hassan to himself, unable to believe in such a tragedy.

Derwent strode up and down the room in his

endeavour to keep calm. His impulse was to rush off by the next train to Trichinopoly; but he knew such a course would be unwise. In the first place he was tied to his appointment by red tape, and could not leave without breaking a rule. Secondly he was aware that he would not be allowed to see her. Further, it would only excite her and increase the feverish symptoms to hear that he was in the place.

"Unfortunately her sister cannot join her," continued Derwent, coming to a stand in the middle of the room. "She and her husband have gone to Burmah. He was ordered off suddenly and unexpectedly on his arrival from home. So Miss Orban is alone. Of course she has friends. Europeans are good to each other out here and no mistake."

"I'm sorry, very, very sorry," said Hassan, continuing to gaze at Derwent with the strange wonder in his eyes. It was incomprehensible how the Englishman maintained his self-possession and managed to speak so dispassionately. Derwent must surely realise all that this catastrophe meant. It would change the whole current of his life. No man in his senses would marry a lame wife any more than he would marry one who was blind.

"It's an awful calamity for her, poor girl!" responded Derwent. "She will feel the loss of her parents—both taken at the same time. I can't believe that they are gone. They are to be buried this afternoon. I couldn't possibly get there in time to be present even if I had leave."

"Can I help you by lending you a car? Is there anything I can do? I should be so glad for Miss Orban's sake to be of use. I claim to be one of your oldest friends. Don't forget that fact, please."

Derwent held out his hand; he could not speak for the moment. Hassan shook it with a strong nervous grip, and the other resumed his walk.

"I had a long letter from her this morning," he said when he had recovered himself. "It was posted just

before she started on that fatal trip to Poodacotta: In it she mentions that a friend was lending them the car, and she was looking forward to the pleasure of the drive." He sighed and was silent for a few seconds. Then changing his tone with a determined effort he said in a more businesslike manner, "I asked you to come and see me as I have a message for you from Miss Orban. It is about the English lady who will come to you as a companion for your wife. I asked Miss Orban if she knew of any one suitable and she says in her letter that there is a lady now in Trichinopoly whom she thinks would do admirably. She has tried nursing but doesn't like it ; can't stand the surgery part ; she wants to take a companionship or secretaryship. She has a pleasant personality and plenty of tact. She speaks Hindustani, so there will be no difficulty over language."

"It sounds as if she would be just what we want."

"Miss Orban recommends your putting her into a bungalow near your palace. It will be better than giving her rooms. She can have her own servants and she will be able to see something of the English people here. She is a Mrs. Barstow, the widow of a man who died in Mysore."

"She is English-born, of course," said Hassan.

"Thoroughly English in every way. She has had a good education. Her son—she has one child—has been sent home to his grandmother ; and Mrs. Barstow wants to support herself. Shall I write, or will you ?"

"I will with pleasure."

"Tell her exactly what you want. Miss Orban is sure that you will like her."

They discussed Mrs. Barstow, and Hassan asked if the terms he intended were sufficient.

"I am certain that she will be satisfied. You are treating her handsomely in my opinion," remarked Derwent.

"I shall require a good deal from her. My wife"—he hesitated,—“my wife is blind.”

"Blind ! poor thing ! what a terrible calamity for her ! Was she born blind ?"

"No ; it has come on in the last two or three years," he said reluctantly, regretting that he had mentioned the matter as soon as the words had left his lips. Yet Mrs. Barstow would learn the fact as soon as she saw Nissa, and probably speak of it to her English friends sooner or later. He would never have made the same admission to a man of his own race ; but it was different with Derwent, his old schoolfellow and college friend.

Well as he knew Englishmen, however, there was something in Derwent's remark that surprised him. The sole thought of the latter was of Nissa, whom he did not know and had never seen. He pitied her. For Hassan he had no word of pity or condolence. It was the first time the Muhammadan had heard any one speak otherwise than with indignation about the unfortunate girl who had aided in the cruel deception. Derwent did not know the circumstances ; but the mere fact of being burdened with a blind wife should in Hassan's opinion have appealed to Derwent's compassion and stirred it on his friend's behalf.

"You are doing the kindest thing in the world in providing your wife with a woman like Mrs. Barstow as a companion. It will be giving her new eyes. Mrs. Barstow will bring no end of pleasure and interest into her life."

Hassan felt uncomfortable, pushed unconsciously into a false position by his friend, a position he did not merit. Never once up to this moment had a ray of real pity touched him ; although he was not far from it when he intervened between Fazeela and his wife. His anger had died down ; but a sense of injury remained. For the first time he thought of Nissa's misfortune as something that might be hard to bear, something that inflicted hourly pain. The fact that she was plunged into a terrible state of darkness was forced upon him in a disturbing way as Derwent talked of

Mrs. Barstow. He had hitherto never tried to consider what that impenetrable curtain must be like which was hung before her eyes. Once when he was a boy, his mother shut him in a darkened room for some childish fault. To this day he remembered his feeling of helpless terror, as she barred the door and excluded every ray of light. It seemed as though the blackness closed in upon him and pressed against his eyeballs. Was that how Nissa felt? Was she plunged in a world of eternal darkness, or was her blindness tempered by a glimmer of light? He felt a wave of shame pass over him as he recalled the fact that he had made no inquiry as to her state. And here was Derwent taking it for granted that he, Hassan, was doing all in his power to mitigate the affliction! His heart-searchings were broken into by his friend, whose thoughts had gone back to his own troubles.

"As soon as the doctors give permission I shall go down to Trichinopoly on five days' casual leave. It won't interfere with other leave later on, which I shall want when Miss Orban is fit to move. You see with Colonel and Mrs. Orban gone, and her sister in Burmah, Miss Orban is left in rather a peculiar position," he continued unable to resist the temptation to talk to a sympathetic friend who knew her as well as himself and all the circumstances. "She is dependent on the kindness of her neighbours. At this moment she is being nursed in the Judge's house."

"I suppose she will have to go back to England when she is well enough to travel," remarked Hassan as Derwent paused.

"Not at all! We shall be married as soon as it is possible and I shall bring her up here," Derwent replied quickly.

"You will be married!" repeated Hassan in astonishment.

"Of course! Why not? I don't see that anything better can be done. I wish I could marry her at once."

"But she has lost her foot, you say; she is lamed for life!"

Derwent turned on him in astonishment.

"Good heavens! man! you don't suppose for a moment that it will make any difference?" he cried. "Lame, halt, blind! I'd marry her to-morrow, and thank God for giving me the boon of her love. You ought to know by experience that love for one's wife is not to be put aside because she happens to have met with an accident. Love is deeper than that. Look what—by your own showing—you are doing yourself! Aren't you trying to help your own wife to bear her trouble? and won't she be thanking you every day of your life, and giving you a full measure of love for your care of her?"

Then as Hassan remained silent, not knowing what to reply, Derwent continued—

"It is curious that we should have each a similar trouble in a way. We took our roughs and tumbles together at school and shared our pleasures and anxieties at the 'Varsity. Now here we are apparently in much the same case with very little to choose between us."

Still Hassan was silent, strangely moved yet unable to conquer the inbred reserve that keeps the oriental from speaking of his family outside his house. Moreover it was difficult to step down from the pedestal of virtue on which he had unwillingly been placed. He could not explain how selfish he had been in his disappointment; how he had nursed anger and clamoured for revenge in a spirit foreign to the English teaching of public school and college. For the first time in his life he felt himself to be a mean despicable creature, whom no Englishman like Derwent would care to claim as a friend.

"So you're back again at work, condensing European politics for His Highness and feeding him with the cream of the news. I hope he doesn't worry himself over the affairs of Turkey. They'll come out all right

in time," said Derwent, with an effort at giving a turn to the conversation.

"It is pleasant work but the hours are long, as I have to be in attendance whether I am wanted or not. I am arranging to spend the holidays with Lord Rivenhall in a shooting expedition. It will be very pleasant."

"Sorry I can't come with you. I hope to be married at Christmas as we originally fixed. If she can possibly bear it we will carry her to church in an ambulance. If she can't be moved, then I will marry her in the Judge's house."

Hassan departed with food for thought. He imagined that he had fathomed the man of the West and sized him up completely. He was wrong. There were recesses and corners in the mind of the Englishman which had yet their secrets to reveal. He had discovered one just now, and the discovery had had a disturbing effect.

In comparing himself with his friend he could not but admit that Derwent had taken a higher and nobler view; he had lost sight of himself in his pity for another. Hassan on the contrary had regarded the trouble from a purely selfish point of view; and had altogether lost sight of the person who according to Derwent merited pity most. Which of them was right?

He was sufficiently conversant with Western thought to understand how largely pity entered into the life of the man of the West. It was at the root of every beneficent institution, every charitable action. Whatever its origin it was the monopoly of no particular sect or party. It allied itself to every form of Christianity as well as to philanthropy.

Hassan tried to look at his own trouble from a detached point of view, and judge himself by the standard set up unexpectedly by Derwent. The verdict went against him. Yes; he had been selfish in his anger, and devoid of pity in his disappointment. Not only had he spurned his bride, but he had allowed his

love—or what he thought was love—to be extinguished in his wrath and revulsion.

Derwent, on the contrary, had risen to higher things. Instead of turning from his betrothed in her maimed condition with loathing, he was going to her with open arms ; impatient to shelter and protect ; longing to soften the affliction which the great God had seen fit to impose upon her. Here was generosity and unselfishness of the noblest kind.

Hassan's thoughts flew to Nissa. She was gentle, lovable, beautiful—except for those poor dull eyes. Why should he turn from her ? Then the oriental spoke with an insidious accusation.

After all the Englishman was not so unselfish as he seemed. On the contrary was he not influenced by a selfishness that was greater, far greater than the Muhammadan's ? In choosing a wife he ignored the fact that she might bear him children. He thought only of the present and of his momentary desires. Was a man justified in afflicting an inherited infirmity upon his offspring, at the dictates of pity for the individual, or for a personal affection ? The Quran forbade it.

Yet for all that Hassan found himself suddenly and unexpectedly placed on a new plane of thought by the action of his English friend.

CHAPTER XVII

YASIN was disturbed and unhappy. He had deliberately and out of pure mischief been the cause of the evil omens that heralded the unfortunate marriage. Fazeela recalled frequently with many lamentations the signs of ill-tuck that had haunted her.

"Allah intended them as a sign. We were in too great a hurry to complete the marriage. The Shahzada would have been wise to have waited. It would have given us time to arrange for the girl to pay us a visit here. Then all would have been known."

"They might have refused to let her come," suggested Yasin.

"In that case our suspicions would have been raised. The Bibi takes little or no notice of what is going on round her. It was always for me to point out lucky days or the signs of Allah's disapproval. I blame myself for not having paid more attention to the ill omens."

She sighed and her son replied with a touch of impatience.

"So you keep saying, mother. I tell you that the omens you noticed meant nothing."

"I will never believe it! They were a sign of misfortune."

"Haven't you observed that they have stopped of late? Yet my brother is in no better plight; he is still the husband of a blind wife, and his misfortune remains. I tell you that outside the hareem we men pay no attention to omens, good or bad. They are old women's tales only fit to frighten children."

Fazeela looked at him with consternation.

"Aiyoh! my son! Don't you be taking up these new-fashioned notions. We all know that omens are sent by Allah himself by the hands of His angels; as they were sent to Balaam whose ass had more wisdom than he had. To disregard the actions of Allah is to disbelieve. To disbelieve is to be wanting in faith. Tell me; what is the portion of the unbeliever after death? Tormenting pain and scalding misery. Pah! don't talk to me!"

Yasin, like his brother, had had more than one lecture from the Nawab himself on the subject of the fate of unbelievers. He did not wish for another. His mother had spoilt him in many ways. He made an impatient movement of his shoulders, and murmured something about the impossibility of pouring sense into her. To turn her thoughts he opened up another subject that lay very near his heart and was the cause of his disturbed mind.

"I think it is about time that the arrangements for my marriage were begun. I wish you would speak to my father about it."

"The Shahzada is still full of his eldest son's wedding and its failure. He says, 'Don't talk to me about weddings till I have forgotten this one'."

Yasin sat scowling in his disappointment, doing his best to make his brows meet so that his mother might see for herself how troubled and unhappy he was.

"If you bring the matter often enough to his notice he will listen. The fault lies with you, my mother! you!"

He talked like a spoilt child. Instead of scolding him for his folly, she tried to sooth him with terms of endearment, and consoling reassurances that he should have all he wanted if he would only be a good boy and wait. He knew her weakness and was not to be cajoled into silent submission.

"A short time ago you were continually praising the beauty of Huleema. You raised my desires and I feel now as if I could not live without her. Let it be the

nikah ceremony if my father doesn't want the expense and trouble of the shahdee. I must have her. I will not be put off just because Hassan's marriage has been unfortunate."

"It is not for you to say 'must' and 'will not!' These affairs are settled by your elders. Sons have no voice in the making of their marriages," replied Fazeela with weak irritation and carefully avoiding her son's gaze.

"I understood my marriage was partly arranged already. In January I take up my new appointment in the secretariat. Will it be the time, then, to talk of marriage, I ask? Let the business be proceeded with at once that I may spend my honeymoon in peace and enjoyment. It is the right of every follower of the Prophet to have undisturbed possession of his bride for a few weeks. It seems that I shall not be allowed even a few days."

"You don't deserve to have a wife, talking to me like that!" said Fazeela angrily.

"I am only asking for my rights."

He recapitulated all his arguments; his mother listened, sulkily relapsing into silence since he would not listen to reason. At length as she refused to answer his questions, his suspicions were aroused. Something lay behind this sudden change. Breaking off in the middle of a tirade against her delay, he left her abruptly to think the matter out. On the next occasion when he found himself alone with his mother he accused her of being false to his interests.

The charge was made suddenly and took her unawares. As soon as she could collect her scattered senses, she began to pour out a string of excuses, quoting the Shahzada and reiterating her first statement, that he was tired of weddings and would hear of no more in the family at present.

Yasin was not deceived. There was something in the wind, he could not tell what, which was unfavourable to his interests. Had his mother cast eyes on another girl? Was there a hitch over settlements or the

form of marriage to be employed if he married Huleema ? Question after question poured from his lips ; all of which Fazeela refused to answer. He could get nothing out of her in the way of admission or contradiction. The more he talked the more obstinately she closed her mouth. He had never known his mother to be in so difficult a mood.

He left her to think out the best course to pursue ; for he was determined to get to the bottom of the mystery. He came to the conclusion that it would be wisest to go straight to his father and have it out with him. It was a bold course, requiring some courage, but none other presented itself to his mind. After all the Nawab was his father. A son ought to be able to prefer a reasonable request to his parent without incurring his wrath. With due respect he would state his wishes and throw himself on the Shahzada's compassion.

The interview, for which he begged, unknown to his mother, was granted, late as it was in the day. The Nawab received him kindly and inquired what he wanted. Yasin had always stood in some awe of the dignified old man, whom his mother had taught him to regard as master as well as parent. Now that the moment had arrived the impetuous boy was not without some misgivings that perhaps he had been rash in his haste.

The Shahzada was seated on a sofa placed on a dais at the end of the room which was curtained at the back. The Japanese screens were so arranged as to form a little chamber from which the draught was excluded. A table stood before him and as he leaned his elbow on the cushions of the sofa, he read aloud from the Quran. On the appearance of Yasin he left the book open, as though he intended shortly to return to his religious exercises, and told Yasin to rise from the ground where he had prostrated himself.

"Well ! my son ! what is it ? Why have you asked to see me at this hour of the evening ?" he inquired, looking at the handsome boy with a father's pride.

"Excellency ! I have come to ask a great favour of the Presence."

"Speak ; perhaps I may be able to grant it."

"It is that my marriage with Huleema Bee may be proceeded with ; so that I may spend a proper and suitable time with my bride before I begin office work."

"No marriage has been arranged for you, my son," said the old man, quietly.

"No marriage ! but my mother has spoken of it these three months past ! Scarcely a day has gone by without mention of it, and all we shall do to honour my bride," exclaimed Yasin with some excitement, his long thin hands nervously fingering the gold embroidery on the crimson velvet waistcoat that he wore in the house over his long white coat.

"Your mother cannot have led you to believe that Huleema Bee was to be your wife !" said the Nawab with a lifting of the eyebrows. "She is aware that the family have other designs for her, and she should have told you so. It is probable that Huleema Bee will be given to a husband who occupies a higher position than you. Later on we will find some one suitable for the honour of the shahdee ceremony."

Yasin's spirits fell. His imagination regarding Huleema had been fed to such an extent by his foolish mother, that he was as deeply in love as a man of the East could be who had never set eyes on his chosen bride.

"She is promised to another man !" he cried in dismay, and unable to conceal his bitter disappointment.

"That is so," was the quiet rejoinder.

It was the knell of his hopes, and his heart sank within him. He dropped to the ground once more at his father's side, and with his forehead touched the rich carpet that covered the dais.

"Oh ! my father ! my gracious lord ! cannot it be altered ? You are rich ; you are good ; you have never denied your sons when you have been able to grant their requests. Plead for me that the lady Huleema

Bee may be given to me. I shall die if she is given to another!"

The brows of the Shahzada contracted. Hassan's trouble had shaken him and he had only just recovered from the shock of it. Any other time he might have smiled at his younger son's extravagant sentiments. At the moment they only served to irritate him.

"This is foolishness, Yasin. There are plenty of other well-born girls who will please you equally well. Since you desire marriage so much I will speak to your mother at once about making a choice, and if it pleases her the shahdee ceremonies shall be used."

"I will have Huleema and none other. If I can't have her I won't be married at all!" cried Yasin, rebelliously.

The Nawab rose slowly to his feet, his face darkening as the angry blood rose. He regarded the rash young man with glittering eyes.

"You will have whom I choose. Get up and return at once to your mother's room. Tell her that I wish to speak to her. Go!"

Yasin, subdued by his father's manner, and not a little alarmed for the consequences of his temerity, got up without another word, made a low salaam, placing his hands together in mute supplication for mercy, and left the room. He was already repenting his presumption; but the boy had his share of the old man's indomitable spirit and preserved a bold front.

Fazeela was sitting with the Begum in happy ignorance of the trouble her son had been brewing for her. She was listening with absorbing interest to a story Nissa was relating of some wonderful Arabian prince who had been carried away to China by a powerful magician. The prince had just been changed into a beautiful bird, and presented to a powerful Chinese Queen, when Yasin burst in upon them and stopped the tale.

"My father, the Shahzada, wishes to see you at once," he said to his mother without preamble.

It was a most unusual summons and the Begum looked up quickly.

"Is His Excellency ill that he sends for your mother?"

"No, Bibi, it is not that. He would talk to my mother now, at this very minute, about my marriage."

Fazeela, who had risen to her feet to obey the summons, turned upon him swiftly.

"Have you mentioned it to the Shahzada?" she asked sharply, laying a detaining hand on his arm as he was about to leave the room.

"Yes," he answered sullenly. "Since you remained silent, I was obliged to do so. I have been asking him to use his influence with Huleema Bee's family; and I learn from him that she is intended for another man. It is outrageous that I should be fooled in this way. Isn't it enough that my brother should be tricked by having a blind wife thrust into his arms. I am to fare even worse and go without a bride altogether. I tell you, mother, that I will not submit. . . ."

Here Fazeela, after two or three attempts to stop him, clapped her hands violently. Immediately two men of the class employed in the hareems of the East entered the room. They were strong, stoutly built individuals, well calculated in appearance to guard their master's property. Fazeela pointed to her son.

"Take him away and keep him safely in my room till I come back. Listen, Yasin," she continued as they each seized an arm. "If your father orders you to be beaten, I shall see myself that these men carry out his order."

She walked away snorting with indignation and rage at the thought of her son's unheard of impertinence, first in seeking his father's presence without her consent; and secondly, in daring to interfere in and give an opinion concerning his own marriage. Yasin was hurried off, but before he could be pushed out of sight by the two men, the Begum said—

"Hurt him not. It is only foolishness. If necessary

I will speak to the Shahzada. He is not to be beaten."

A speech that brought a little consolation to the frightened boy. He was released as soon as his mother's room was reached ; but his two guardians seated themselves before the door and gave him no opportunity of escape. While he waited he had plenty of time to think ; and as his head cooled he fully realised that he had gone too far. No well-conducted Muslim presumes to dictate to his parents in the choice of a bride.

At the end of fifteen minutes Fazeela returned. She was full of wrath, and she poured out her abuse without stint. How dared he approach his father at all in the matter ; still less dictate ! What evil demon prompted him to go to the Presence ; just at a time too when he was reading the Quran ? What mischievous spirit had encouraged him to say that he would have Huleema Bee for his bride or none at all ? She was far too good for such a hot-head ! such a stupid, senseless boy ! He was worthy only of a slave ; yes, a black slave born of village people to whom the moorta ceremony would be an honour instead of a disgrace !

Yasin bent his head to the storm. He knew his mother's temperament better than he knew his father's. She would cool down when she had spent her wrath in a cyclone of words. He put his hands over his eyes and pretended to shed tears. The sight of his contrition served more effectively than words and excuses to mollify her. She had never been able to resist the signs of grief and repentance from the days when he was a small boy.

"Did my honoured father order me to be beaten ?" he asked in a voice admirably broken for the occasion.

"At first nothing but that would satisfy him. I fell at his feet and implored mercy. In consideration for me, your mother, he granted my request. But he reproached me with words that burned for having brought you up to be so wilful and misguided. My son, you must promise amendment."

"I do ! I do !" cried the penitent.

"You can go!" she said to the two men who still guarded the door.

They gladly went back to their snug corner in the verandah outside the Begum's rooms, where they had left their comfortable rugs and cushions. As soon as they were out of hearing, Yasin asked if there was any chance of Huleema being given to him.

"None whatever! Put her out of your mind at once," said Fazeela decidedly.

"I can't! I can't! She is the light of my eyes! the full moon of my existence! the jasmine flower of my life!"

"You talk foolishness and behave like a baby! I will find you another wife quite as beautiful as Huleema Bee. Take comfort, my son. Your father has given me permission to make what arrangements I like; and the wedding is to be at any date the Bibi chooses to name."

But Yasin was not to be comforted. He was born and brought up in the East. From his childhood he had cried for what he wanted, and if it was possible to procure it, it was his. He was too old now to rely on floods of tears, but he could still manage to look as if his heart was breaking, and the tears on the brink of falling.

He dropped upon the cushions of his mother's divan, and leaning on his elbows hid his face in his hands. She leaned over him and laid her hand on his shoulder. She could feel him trembling beneath her touch as though he were shaken with sobs.

"Is not this another reason why we should manage these affairs without the knowledge of our children? I ought to have kept silence about Huleema Bee until the wedding was settled," she said, more to herself than to her son. "This time I will tell the foolish boy nothing. I will not say a word of the bride's beauty and charms. He shall discover them for himself when he enters the bridal chamber."

"I tell you, mother, as I told the Shahzada, my honoured father, I won't marry at all if I can't have

Huleema Bee," declared Yasin. "Have the arrangements for Huleema's marriage with any other man been completed?"

"Not yet; there is reason for a little delay."

"Why? does the lady Huleema object?"

"Indeed, she is far too well brought up to be guilty of such a thing. She will be pleased with any arrangements that her parents may make."

There was silence, during which the mother's hand stroked her son's head in unspoken sympathy and compassion. She was deeply sorry for him. She knew he was unreasonable; that it was foolish to say he was in love with Huleema. Yet the romance of it appealed to her imagination, and in her secret heart she admired his fidelity.

"Mother!" said Yasin presently. "Is it known who is to be Huleema's husband?"

"Yes, my son! It is known to your father and me even though no ceremony has as yet taken place."

"May I hear his name?"

"Perhaps it would be as well that you should learn it and be prepared for what the Shahzada will order."

Again there was silence—a brooding silence that for Yasin was filled with a sudden and terrible apprehension. His mother went on—

"His name is the name borne by your brother. He is Hassan, the son of the Shahzada, Nawab Cassim ud Deen."

Yasin groaned in his anguish. His face drooped upon the pillows, and he bit into their depths as he clenched his hands in the agony of the first real trouble that had overshadowed his life since he had arrived at manhood. His mother, forgetting all her anger, melted into tears at the sight of her son's grief, and flung her arms round him.

"It is hard, very hard, but it is the will of Allah, my son, and it must be endured."

* * * * *

Meanwhile Nissa had taken up the thread of her story, and Hassan coming in on an excuse of requiring his mother's advice about some trifling household matter, trod softly and lifted a finger to prevent his mother from silencing his wife. Nissa, fully absorbed in the adventures of the gallant prince of her imagination, continued his wonderful adventures. She brought him through endless dangers into a palace of pearl and gold, full of colour and light. There he lived a long and happy life with the charming princess who had been the means of delivering him from the toils of the wicked magician.

Hassan watched the curved lips and the dainty hands that were raised with a curious grace to emphasize the points of her story. The head was uplifted proudly as she repeated the words in which the prince expressed his gratitude and love to the princess, and it was bent in humility as the lady responded with a promise of fidelity to the day of her death.

Oh! why had fate been so cruel? Had some evil magician been at work to destroy those beautiful eyes?

When Nissa arrived at the defeat of the magician, and his dissolution in a curl of evil-smelling smoke, she laughed. It was a happy laugh such as he might have heard could she have seen half the treasures he had gathered for her. His mother caught the infection and echoed Nissa's laugh. He started and leaned forward in his chair, almost but not quite forgetting her affliction. Then unconsciously he laughed too. Her quick ears caught the sound and she was silent, listening intently.

"My husband? Are you there too?" she asked breathlessly.

"Yes; I heard the end of your story. It was delightful."

"You were pleased, my beloved? I am glad!"

He turned away sharply as though afraid to say

more, and spoke to the Begum; they talked for a few minutes on household matters. When the conversation was at an end Hassan said—

“I have news for you, mother. I told you some days ago that I was thinking of engaging an English lady to help in looking after Nissa. I have had a letter from her.”

“Is she willing to come?”

“She is delighted to do so and is anxious to begin her work at once, as she has been some time with her friends at Trichinopoly. I have found a house that is suitable, and I sent her a telegram to say that we are ready. She has replied that she will be here the day after to-morrow. I hope you will find her useful. If you—or if Nissa”—he added after a slight hesitation, “don’t like her, let me know and I will ask her to resign.”

Nissa with clasped hands was listening intently.

“Have you told her?” he asked as his eyes rested on his wife.

“Not yet,” replied the Begum.

“Nissa!” he said quickly.

“My lord!” came the immediate reply.

“I have engaged an English lady to be your companion.”

He went on to explain coldly and diffidently at first all that he hoped Mrs. Barstow would be. Insensibly he grew warmer as he described how she might bring fresh interest and pleasure into Nissa’s life. He watched the listening girl and the changing expressions in her face—surprise, delight, gratitude and hope. A wave of pity swept over him taking him unawares.

Abruptly breaking off in his description of all Mrs. Barstow was to do he got up and left the room. The Begum looked after him and sighed, but Nissa, who had seen nothing, could only think of the joy her husband was bringing into her life.

“Mother! isn’t your son like the prince in my story? noble and good and kind! Oh! if I might but

kiss his feet ! Would he be angry ? or would he lift me in his arms ? ”

“ Daughter ! forget the real and think only of the prince of your imagination. Did ever the real equal the dream ? Never, child, never ! ”

CHAPTER XVIII

MRS. BARSTOW arrived and entered into residence in the little bungalow assigned to her use. Hassan made it his business to see that the house was comfortably furnished and that a suitable staff of servants was engaged.

The morning after her arrival he took her himself to the hareem, and introduced her to his mother and wife. Mrs. Barstow was discreet enough to ask no questions as to the standing and occupation of the numerous inmates. There were old women and young peeping at her behind doorways, or boldly following her with staring eyes of wonder. Several children, pretty little boys and girls, ran in and out as they liked until the Begum appeared, when they were caught and carried off out of sight. There were servants bound to the family for life, who did the bidding of their superiors. Some of them had babies in their arms, little dark creatures ignored altogether by the Bibi and Fazeela. As Mrs. Barstow entered the door of the hareem she encountered a powerful man of stout build with expressionless mouth and heavy eyes. He reminded her of a sullen but watchful dog, unfriendly and suspicious.

She was puzzled at first over Fazeela and her position, but she speedily discovered her to be a power in the hareem, a woman of dominant spirit who might prove disagreeable as an enemy.

With Nissa she was delighted. She made friends with her at once, and Hassan left them together satisfied that as far as his wife was concerned he had made no

mistake. The Begum was also an easy conquest. Her memory went back to the lady who had brightened her own young life and she knew even better than her son what a wise move had been made.

It took but a short time for Mrs. Barstow to discover that much might be done to bring pleasure and interest into the life of her pupil. Naturally clever Nissa learned quickly and showed herself possessed of a good memory. Her gift for telling tales of romance was encouraged, and after listening to wonderful histories of princes who suffered misfortunes at the hands of magicians and malicious fairies, Mrs. Barstow related in her turn stories of real life in that far-off mysterious West that had a greater fascination for Nissa than all the fairy realms of wonderland ; for was it not the country of her husband's boyhood and education ?

Through Hassan all kinds of objects were procured, and graphically described while Nissa's sensitive fingers passed over the articles. The Begum watched the education of her daughter-in-law and her rapid development with inward astonishment. It was like pouring water on a parched soil. Nissa's nature blossomed out in a variety of unexpected ways. The reserve and silent timidity gave place to spontaneous gaiety and grateful affection. Underlying it all was a quiet sense of humour that was as vivifying to the spirits as the warm rays of the sun upon the watered earth. The fascinating dainty tricks of the child returned as her confidence grew ; and her tongue recovered the old gift of quaint and original comment ; and each new accomplishment drew forth expressions of gratitude to her teacher. So occupied was she with Mrs. Barstow that troubles outside the hareem scarcely touched her.

Trouble there was of more than one kind. It was partly due to Yasin, who had his own method of paying out his mother for what he considered to be perfidy to his cause. He was not of a vicious and revengeful disposition, and though passionate and lacking in self-control he was neither sullen nor morose. He believed

himself to be wronged, and he did not intend to take it quietly. His spirit of mischief and fun prompted a retaliation that he knew would strike terror into his mother's heart. He resumed his tricks and set his ingenuity to work to frighten Fazeela to such an extent as to make her abandon her designs upon Huleema. He had his intervals of despondency, but his sunny nature asserted itself and the gloom he deliberately cultivated gradually wore away under the success of his machinations.

The ill omens reappeared with greater frequency than ever, and his mother was haunted by sights and sounds that presaged evils of the worst kind. Fazeela always brought her tale of woe to the Begum and related each incident, dwelling in the details as long as the patience of her mistress lasted. When it was worn out, she fastened on the various inmates of the hareem in turn, and repeated her experiences till she could no longer command their attention.

She caught a glimpse of a small snake crossing her path in the garden, a very bad sign. It would not have mattered so much if she had been wandering up and down merely to eat the air; but she was intent on a particular errand. She had heard that evil spirits could be driven away by a plentiful scattering of margosa leaves. She had gone to gather the leaves from a tree in the garden with the intention of placing them under Yasin's pillow. She was convinced that nothing less than an evil spirit had prompted the boy to go to his father about his own marriage. The sooner the devil was driven out the better; or worse might befall him.

The snake, she said, passed very rapidly; but she saw it quite plainly with her eyes all the same; and it was a sign of bad luck, she declared, as she repeated the story for the tenth time. It was as thick as a piece of rope and the same colour. She pronounced it to be a deadly kind of viper. The gardeners were summoned and a thorough search instituted in which Yasin assisted; but nothing was found. He happened

to be in the garden and he corroborated his mother's story, vowing that he had seen the snake himself.

Nissa, listening with all ears, asked if Fazeela was quite sure that it was a snake and not a harmless lizard. The girl often walked in the garden and the thought of snakes made her nervous. The old woman replied angrily that she had eyes if other people had not, and she knew what it was.

On another occasion a small black cat jumped upon her as she was leaving her room. It seemed to come from the top of the purdah as she pushed the curtain aside. Yasin who was standing near gave chase; but the terrified animal fled along the dark passage and disappeared. He brought no comfort to his mother, as he declared that instead of having green eyes, it had the red eyes of a demon, and it came to warn her of evil.

"It has to do with Huleema Bee," he said in a melancholy voice.

"Huleema! indeed, you can think of nothing else, you foolish boy! I shall be glad when the office holidays are over and you begin your work."

She walked on and was presently startled by a loud sneeze in the distance, another ill omen according to her traditions. Hurrying on to complete her errand she caught her foot in a piece of matting that had only recently been laid down and was warped into unevenness. This she regarded as yet another sign of bad luck.

As for Yasin himself, if he was to be believed—and his fond mother never doubted his word—he was continually encountering objects that bespoke misfortune to the whole house.

Besides evil omens there were other matters that caused anxiety. Without being laid up with any definite complaint the Nawab was far from well. He was manifestly suffering from shock, and his interview with Yasin had not helped to quiet his nerves. The Begum was anxious; but being of a reserved nature she repressed her anxiety and kept her fears to herself.

Fazeela on the contrary bewailed the failing health of the Shahzada from morning to night, and made the whole establishment nervous and apprehensive with her forebodings. Hassan, away all day at the palace, was unaffected and to a great extent ignorant of what was passing, nor did he see any cause for uneasiness in his father's condition. The old man would recover his equilibrium in time and live for many years to come.

The failure of his son's marriage rankled more deeply in the Nawab's mind than Hassan was aware of. The fear haunted him that he would not live to see a son born to his eldest son. The anxiety of succession was ever present. In the old days it was often in dispute when the eldest son of the eldest son was a child, and the sons of the younger son were men. Yasin was too eager for marriage. The Nawab thought he saw possible difficulties ahead if Yasin's sons grew up to manhood before Hassan's son was born. The outcome of his ruminations was always the same; Hassan must marry again, the sooner the better.

The Begum's presence was often required in the Nawab's rooms. On some pretext or other he sent for her, and before she had been with him five minutes he re-opened the subject. They must make a second marriage for Hassan without delay. She listened in silence, neither opposing nor encouraging him. When pressed to reply, it was always the same counsel. Wait; wait; do nothing in a hurry, give Hassan time to get over his disappointment, he was not ready for a second marriage. Then she was dismissed, and he was left with a vague feeling of uneasiness and stagnation. It seemed as if the world—his world within the palace—was against him; no progress was made towards the end he had in view, and nothing was done to forward that end. It fretted the old man and he felt his helplessness. If only he could get rid of the cough that troubled him and regain some of his old vigour, he would drive the matter through with a high hand in spite of Hassan's opposition and the Begum's half-heartedness. Up to

the present Hassan had not been sounded definitely on the subject, and the Nawab had no intention of asking his opinion. When the time came he would command and see that his commands were obeyed ; but before taking any step the second wife must be found and the preliminaries concluded.

Fazeela was summoned as often as the Begum. She sympathised warmly with him and encouraged him to take action as soon as possible. It was she who suggested the choice of Huleema. It mattered little to her who Yasin married as long as a suitable wife was found, and there would be no difficulty when the time for her son's marriage came.

The Nawab caught eagerly at the idea of marrying Huleema to Hassan, and listened approvingly as she praised her beauty and talked of her good birth. The family did not occupy quite so high a position in the state as Nissa's, nor was the head of it as wealthy as her father, but it was quite worthy of being allied by marriage to the Shahzada's house.

As she sat at the feet of the Nawab she heard an owl cry outside. She stopped suddenly in her speech in the middle of describing Huleema's many virtues, and the advantage it would be to secure a healthy girl such as she was.

"What is the matter ?" he asked.

"Did the Presence hear the owl cry ? An evil omen at any time !"

"An owl at this time of the day ?" he replied, irritably. "It is enough to make one laugh, this talk of yours ! The owl is a bird of the night. Your ears are growing old, and you are getting foolish with your chatter of evil signs !"

She hastily resumed her panegyrics on Huleema, and when she had ended he said—

"How do you know she is all that ? Exactly the same was said of Nissa before she was married, and see how she has turned out ; a failure, a miserable failure ! How can you tell whether Huleema may not prove

equally unsatisfactory. For all that we know she may be deaf," he concluded, querulously.

"Let her be brought here to the hareem," suggested Fazeela. "I will take good care to find out whether she is sound in her limbs and senses. The Bibi should have insisted on a visit being paid by Nissa. Then all this trouble would never have occurred."

"That is so," assented the Nawab. "See that you arrange a visit in the Bibi's name and let there be no delay. Now go; I'm tired. You can talk it over with her; but mind! not a word to Hassan. I will speak to him myself when the time comes."

"And as soon as this second marriage is completed will the Presence be so good as to consider my son's?" she ventured to ask as she made the customary salaam.

"Yes; yes!" he replied impatiently. "You may marry that young hot-head as soon as Hassan has taken to himself a wife who will bear him a son; but until then Yasin remains single."

Fazeela was well pleased to have gained even that little. She hurried back to the hareem full of her news, and determined to forward Hassan's second marriage with all her power. The hoot of the owl was forgotten, but she was not permitted to pass from the Shahzada's private room unwarned. A lizard's chirruping cry fell on her ear. She could not look up to see if it was on her right or left as it would necessitate the lifting of her veil. She quickened her steps to a run, and in her haste again stumbled over the mat. By the time she reached her room she was out of breath, and once more thrown into a state of nerves.

She lost not a minute, however, in setting about the fulfilment of the master's wishes. Without waiting to inform the Begum of what had passed she sent a messenger with a handsome present of fruit to Huleema's house and with it a courteous invitation to Huleema Bee herself asking if she would honour the Begum with a visit.

Hassan meanwhile paid his daily visit to his mother and watched the progress his wife was making. He was more than satisfied with the result of his experiment. Encouraged by Mrs. Barstow Nissa was drawn into the family circle. The conversation became general, Nissa taking her part in it, and proving herself an intelligent listener. Hassan frequently found himself addressing her personally as he helped Mrs. Barstow to describe some of the treasures he had brought home. He told her of his experiences in England and on the Continent. Sometimes he began by giving Mrs. Barstow an account of the latest news from Europe; presently he found himself talking to Nissa and explaining what it meant. As he talked he watched the sensitive mouth, and the long eyelashes shading the down-cast eyes that were never raised; and he forgot the calamity that shadowed both their lives. Each time he saw her he thought she had grown more beautiful; and he attributed it to the opening of her mind under the Englishwoman's training. He would have come to his mother's room more frequently had it not been for his duties in connection with his work. He was only able to be with them in the evening.

One evening when Fazeela happened to be present Mrs. Barstow was playing a game she had invented with Nissa. It was a contest in counting. The objects were beads strung upon thread and it had to be played with closed eyes. Nissa was very quick at it and she beat Mrs. Barstow three times out of four. Her laugh of merriment greeted the announcement of her triumph each time. Hassan came in while it was in progress and sat looking on in amusement.

"Let me try," he said, suddenly holding out his hand for a string of beads.

Mrs. Barstow gave him one with a warning that he must honestly keep his eyes closed while he counted. He was not slow over the task, but Nissa beat him and greeted his defeat with a heartier laugh than ever. Then she remembered who the vanquished was.

"Husband! I am so sorry! Since you did me the honour, I should out of courtesy have allowed you to win," she said impulsively.

"Not at all!" he replied. "Mrs. Barstow is here to see fair play. Let me try again."

A second time he was the loser and once more Nissa with the grace of a sensitive child regretted his loss. Suddenly Fazeela interfered for no apparent reason.

"Enough! Enough! it is a foolish game."

"Not if it amuses Nissa," responded Mrs. Barstow quickly.

"It is a foolish game for the young sahib," said Fazeela with disapproval.

Mrs. Barstow rose from her seat by Nissa's side.

"It is time for me to be going back," she said; and turning to Fazeela she added with scrupulous politeness: "Will you be so kind as to send a servant to inquire if my ayah has come with the lantern." Then as Fazeela went out into the passage full of the importance of giving an order Mrs. Barstow bade her pupil good night. "Good night, Nissa; say 'good night' in English."

Nissa did as she was bidden. "Good night, dear Mrs. Barstow," she said with a pretty accent.

"She is getting on, isn't she?" Mrs. Barstow asked of Hassan in English.

"Splendidly!" he replied in the same language. "You have brought light into her darkened world, and we are grateful."

"Give me a kiss, dear," said Mrs. Barstow to Nissa who was standing by her side.

Nissa lifted her face obediently. At the same time, off her guard for the moment, she raised her eyelids and the poor sightless eyes, dimmed and as dull as opaque ground glass were revealed. Hassan started back as if he had been struck. Fortunately his action could not be seen by his wife.

"Good night, Nissa. May Allah preserve you!" he said as he turned away abruptly.

The Begum had been silent all through this little unrehearsed scene. She followed her son to the door and touched him on the arm. They passed through the purdah into the passage that led to his rooms.

"She is very sweet," she said in a low voice.

"Oh, mother!" he cried with sudden abandonment. "It breaks my heart to see her. I love her! I long for her! but——"

"It might be possible to overcome that aversion in time; to get used to the blindness! if so—perhaps——"

She stopped; he understood what she meant. She could see that he was torn with conflicting emotions. Love and desire fought with prejudice.

"A blind mother for my sons!" he said under his breath.

She heard him. "I would be eyes to their mother. Think how sweet, how noble, how beautiful they would be if born of her!"

There was a breathless silence. The sight of her blindness was still fresh and vivid in his recollection.

"My father! he would never consent!"

Without another word he left her. Her head drooped. Hassan had but spoken the truth.

CHAPTER XIX

THE invitation sent by Fazeela to Huleema was readily accepted by her mother. The proposed alliance was an honour whether the elder or the second son was chosen. An early day was fixed, and the hour mentioned was three o'clock in the afternoon.

Among other things instituted by Mrs. Barstow was an afternoon drive in a large closed motor-car. The Begum appreciated the outing as much as Nissa, although they were all closely veiled and the car was rigidly closed with venetians. At half-past two the ladies with their attendants descended by a private staircase leading into a screened verandah. Here the motor waited and the whole party, including Mrs. Barstow, sheltered by sheets held aloft to hide them, entered the car.

On the day named for Huleema's visit the Begum roused herself from the forty winks she took after the twelve o'clock meal and inquired of Fazeela at what time the girl was expected.

"At half-past three," replied Fazeela unblushingly and without hesitation.

"We shall have time for our drive, then."

"Plenty of time ; it would be foolish not to take it ; you all enjoy it so much."

"Have you provided fruits and cakes and sherbet ? Let there be enough ; Huleema will bring a large party with her. Is her mother coming ?"

"She is to come another day with the Nani when all our attention can be given to them and we can have

some dancing girls to amuse them. Everything will be ready by the time you return."

"If she is here before me——"

"You need have no anxiety, Bibi. I shall be here to receive her. She shall be shown into my room and when you are ready I will bring her myself to you. It is not likely that the young master will be paying you a visit at that hour, is it?"

"Not in the least. He will have a long day with His Highness, and will be late in coming to see me this evening."

Fazeela uttered a grunt of satisfaction; this was repeated at half-past two when the Begum and Nissa with Mrs. Barstow and the chosen attendants entered the motor-car and drove away. She had purposely deceived her mistress as to the time Huleema was expected as she wished to have an opportunity of speaking to the girl alone. There were several little points on which she intended to satisfy herself. She wanted to be able to report to the Shahzada that she had personally inquired, and had assured herself first-hand of the truth of her statements.

The task undertaken was not easy. Muhammadan girls of good birth do not pay visits unattended, nor without some member of the family who is constituted the responsible chaperon. There would be other attendants, as many as could crowd into the carriages provided. Fazeela's difficulty would be to separate Huleema from her escort. She was a woman of resource. She laid her plans and made her arrangements with forethought and much scheming.

On arrival of the party she met them at the hareem door with many regrets that the noble Bibi had not yet returned from her drive. Something must have detained them on the road. Possibly the car had broken down, but the chauffeur was clever and he would soon repair it. To pass the time would they deign to accept a little feast that she had herself made for them? Huleema Bee must be so good and gracious as to wait till the

Begum returned as there would be another feast then in the Begum's rooms made specially for her honoured guest. She conducted Huleema to her own room and begged her to stay there while she took her chaperon and the attendants to the ante-room beyond the Begum's where the feast was prepared.

Nothing loth Huleema, delighted to find herself the chief person and singled out for more honour than the rest, seated herself on a divan well furnished with cushions. She was a well-grown girl of just sixteen years, full of excitement over the vague hints that had been thrown out by her family concerning her own wedding to one of the sons of the Nawab.

Fazeela bustled off at once to superintend the beginning of the entertainment in the ante-room. As soon as the preliminary ceremonies were over and the guests had begun to eat, she intended to slip back to Huleema, and to lose no time in making the necessary examination as to her sight and hearing and speech, and her soundness of limb.

As Huleema sat there, leaning back on the pile of silk cushions, she threw aside her veil and fingered her jewels, pulling them into place so that they showed to the greatest advantage.

Suddenly her heart stood still. The mew of a cat fell on her ear. Then she smiled at her own fears and watched the entrance, before which a curtain hung, in the expectation of seeing a kitten—she judged it to be a kitten by its cry—appear. To her intense surprise a long thin shapely hand was laid on the purdah. It drew aside the curtain, and a man peeped in. He was young and good-looking, a youthful moustache adorning his upper lip. His large brown eyes were opened wide with wonder, and his lips were parted. The handsome dress told her that this must be no less a personage than one of the sons of the house.

Yasin carried the same black cat which he declared to his mother had the red eyes of a demon. Properly speaking he should have cried, "Gosha ! gosha !" at

his approach, if he had had any suspicion that strange ladies were about. He had not been told of Huleema's visit ; and being intent upon playing another of his ill-omen tricks, he had crept up noiselessly hoping to take his mother by surprise again.

By all traditional teaching Huleema on her part should have cried out on seeing a strange man ; and enveloping herself in her veil she ought to have fled to a corner of the room, where she should have crouched with her face to the wall until the fearsome stranger was removed ; but like Yasin she failed signally in doing the correct thing. Instead of screaming and darting to cover, she continued to stare at the handsome boy with a fascinated gaze as if she had been petrified.

Yasin, never slow to seize his opportunities, advanced swiftly ; leaning over Huleema as Romeo might have leaned over Juliet at their first meeting, he said in a whisper :

"Oh ! lady ! beautiful as the moon ! what is your name ?"

"Huleema Bee of the noble house of——" and she mentioned her father's name with some of his titles.

"Huleema Bee ! Huleema ! the most beautiful woman in the Deccan ! my pearl ! my lily ! You have filled my heart with your beauty this year past."

He put his arm round her, and without wasting any more time in flowery language he kissed her on the lips. Sad to say, considering that she was a very well-brought-up Muhammadan maiden, she again forgot to scream.

"And you, my lord ?" she asked presently as he lifted his head to listen for the returning footsteps of his mother. "Who are you ? Are you Captain Hassan, the young Shahzada, to whom they talk of marrying me ? Oh ! Allah grant that you may be Hassan !"

"Hassan ! Hassan, indeed ! He is my brother. I am Yasin. Marry you to Hassan, will they ? I pity you ! He is an ugly fellow with one leg shorter than

the other. He is as black as a Hindu pariah and blind with one eye——”

But Yasin could waste no more words on the imaginary portrait of his brother. There was something pleasanter to be done than drawing pictures. He lost no time in taking another kiss. Presently he lifted his head again and listened. His sharp ears caught the sound of the tinkling anklets that he knew to be his mother's.

“Quick! one more! again! Now your veil! Run, light of my soul, to the corner and I will swear you have been there all the time. Oh! heart's delight! my precious pearl! I shall die if you marry that ugly brother of mine!”

The last kiss would have betrayed them if Fazeela had not been startled by seeing the frightened cat cross her path. She hurried back to the room where she had left her guests, and started afresh with as much haste as was possible to a woman of her stoutness. As she came up to the entrance of her room Yasin stood demurely outside, wearing an expression of annoyance on his handsome face.

“What are you doing here, you troublesome boy!” she panted, while suspicion darted across her mind in disturbing fashion.

“Where have you been, mother?” he asked crossly. Then without waiting for a reply he continued in a tone of annoyance. “And why does Nissa hide her face from me when I come into your room? Is she not my brother's wife and one of the family? and do we not meet often in the Bibi's room?”

Fazeela was too confused by his presence there, and by her own haste to secure the desired interview, to detect the false move Yasin had made in pretending to think that the veiled figure was Nissa's. A blind woman could not have found her way to the corner as Huleema had done. He recognised the mistake as soon as he had spoken and continued in a voice of increasing irritability. “On my way here I saw the black cat

again. Why don't you have it hunted out and killed if you can't get rid of it in any other way?"

"I have had many hunts, but the servants have never been able to find it. Aiyoh! my son! I saw it myself just now as I came from the Bibi's room. It means such bad luck!" she said, as she stood by the curtain as if she was on guard. "Why have you come at this hour? I thought you said that you were going shopping for the Shahzada?"

"I have been and have come back. Mother, I am troubled and I came to tell you about it. You ought to consult a wise woman as soon as possible. Perhaps she will be able to give us a charm of some sort. Three times to-day have I been haunted with ill omens. I was walking in Oxford Street to enter one of the shops, when a crow hopped across my path. As I stepped aside to turn away the bad luck I ran against a sweeper carrying a broom. I abused the man soundly, and he had the impudence to tell me that I was not a Brahman, and therefore it was no business of his to get out of my way."

"The budmash! He ought to be well beaten!"

"So he would have been if it had happened in the city; but here in the English cantonments one's hands are tied. Then no sooner had I entered the shop than an officious English assistant came and asked me what I wanted, what my errand was."

"You did not buy anything for the Shahzada, I hope," said Fazeela a little anxiously.

"Of course not! I shall have to go again to-morrow. I hope they will send a Muhammadan server to attend to me."

He made no move to depart, and Fazeela's uneasiness increased.

"It is very disturbing," she said, her forehead puckering under this accumulation of troubles. "If you will go away now I will lead Nissa back to the Bibi's room. The Bibi is out driving. I expect her in every minute. Go, my son, and come back to me in the evening when I

shall have more time to talk. We must certainly consult some wise woman about these signs of misfortune."

"She will say that Allah is displeased" — he raised his voice so that it might reach the veiled figure still crouching in the corner—"at my brother's second marriage. It is I who ought to marry the lady Huleema Bee. Hassan is too busy to think of marriage. His Highness, the Nizam, works him so hard that he is like a dead man with fatigue at night. What good is a wife——"

Fazeela would listen to no more. She pushed him away, but he only moved a step or two.

"Go! get away at once! How dare you talk like this! If you don't go at once I will call the men to remove you."

"I will not be silenced!" cried Yasin in a louder voice than ever. "I am no longer a boy! I love Huleema Bee! She is my star! my moon of delight! my beloved lotus! and she shall be my wife!"

"Take that! and that!" said Fazeela, now thoroughly angry, bringing her hand down upon his cheek in no light manner.

He drew himself up, protecting himself as well as he could from the attack, exclaiming—

"Huleema Bee! Beloved of my heart! She shall not be given to that ugly, lame, ill-tempered brother of mine!" Then he turned away and ran off with his shoulders shaking. His mother grunted with satisfaction at the sight of what she took to be signs of grief. It was as well that she did not know of his dry eyes, or her fury might have led to another uncomfortable encounter with the men-servants of the hareem; who were aware of their own interests and how much depended on the good will of the Shahzada's nikah wife.

Fazeela, already seriously impeded by first one incident and then another, entered her room and hurried to the crouching figure. She laid her hand on the girl's shoulder and Huleema shrieked in well-simulated fear. Fazeela reassured her, and with a great show of alarm, Huleema lifted her veil.

"Oh! sahiba! is it you? I heard a man's voice and I was frightened out of my life: What would my father say if my gosha were broken! He would banish me to his country house or shut me up in his palace within the city walls!"

"There was no fear of your gosha being broken," replied Fazeela impatiently and far from easy in her mind.

"Whose voice was it I heard? It sounded so dreadful I nearly fainted with terror. You ought not to have left me alone. My mother will be very displeased and angry."

Fazeela was becoming alarmed. It would never do to allow this girl to carry home a tale of neglect. It would be seized upon by Huleema's family and made the most of. A grievance of the kind against the family of the Nawab would serve as an excuse to lessen the dowry of Huleema Bee or perhaps bring about a refusal to allow the marriage.

"The voice you heard was that of the Bibi's head servant, Ahmed, whom I left in the passage for the express purpose of giving you 'proper protection,'" said Fazeela crossly.

"It did not sound like the feeble voice of a hareem servant. On the contrary, it was like a big, strong man," replied Huleema, who was enjoying herself amazingly. She had overheard every word spoken by her lover, and the blood tingled in her veins in warm response to the bold wooing. Never before within her knowledge had a woman been seen and embraced by a man before her marriage. She trembled as she pictured the consternation it would cause in her father's hareem if it were known. It must for ever remain secret. But she did not intend to relieve Fazeela's mind by making any promises of silence. It was thrilling to keep the fussy domineering old lady on tenter-hooks.

"I tell you it was that fool, Ahmed. Because we have company, he thinks we cannot get on without his

interference, the fat old stupid ! Say nothing about it, my child. He did not enter the room ; and if he had entered what matter ? Such creatures as he are not men ; they are machines for guarding the privacy of the harem."

"I ought to tell the Nani of my alarm in case I cry out in my sleep to-night. She has ears like a panther's."

"It is unnecessary. Why trouble her with your fears ?"

"You would rather I said nothing about it. Tell me, am I to be given to one of the Shahzada's sons ?"

"It is not for me to say," replied Fazeela, guardedly.

"Do tell me, little mother," said Huleema, coaxingly ; "and I will promise not to mention Ahmed's impertinence in talking so loud outside your room and giving me such a fright. I am still trembling. Feel my hand."

It was perfectly true that Huleema's delicate fingers were still trembling, but it was not from fright.

"Possibly the Nawab may ask—but I cannot say for certain," said Fazeela unwillingly.

The information of the betrothal should come from Huleema's people. Fazeela was aware that she was committing a breach of etiquette by mentioning the subject at all in the girl's hearing.

"If he asks, it will be of course for his second son. His eldest son, Captain Hassan, was married only a short time ago. He will not be taking another wife this long time yet."

"It is for the Shahzada to say——"

A distant hoot from the carriage drive relieved the situation.

"There is the Bibi !" cried Fazeela, inwardly anathematising the chauffeur for having brought them home sooner than she expected.

She hurried away to meet the Begum and announce Huleema's arrival with her following, grumbling to herself as she scurried off because she had not had time

for a single question. Bad luck, again. There must be some evil power working against the house and all its inmates; and she determined to consult the wise woman that very evening.

Huleema, left to herself once more returned to her cushions and gave herself up to the delights of memory. She felt a tremour of bliss go through her as she recalled the touch of her lover's arms about her. She felt again his kisses, and in spirit gave him back full measure for measure.

Not once was she troubled with qualms of conscience over the part she had played. He had not given the usual cry therefore she was absolved from any responsibility of hiding herself. And—most powerful of all Indian maxims—nothing was wrong till it was found out; she took refuge in the delicious thought that the meeting was a secret between herself and Yasin, a secret that no one was in the least likely to discover. It was due to Fazeela's carelessness. If she had left Ahmed or one of his subordinates on guard it could never have happened; but in her haste she had neglected to take the precaution. As long as her adventure remained a secret, there was nothing wrong about it.

The girl's eyes continually turned to the curtain, half hoping to see the hand and the handsome face appear once more, but her gosha was quite safe this time. Yasin would not dare to approach his mother's room again without the warning cry which Huleema would be bound to regard.

The Muhammadan men in shutting up their women to safeguard them from the longing eyes and unrestrained passions of their fellows, have taken upon themselves heavy responsibilities; and in so doing they have left none to the women. The consequence is inevitable. The women never fail to seize every opportunity—provided they can do it without fear of detection—to step over the boundary and court adventure. The fear of discovery, with its shame and

disgrace, holds them back when nothing else will. They are surrounded with spies and they know it. If it can be proved that they have broken their gosha they are divorced and covered with shame for life. If detected in a love affair with another man, worse things than divorce happen of which the outer world hears nothing.

Huleema for her own sake might be trusted, if only Fazeela knew it, not to tell her mother any tales of strange voices in the Begum's hareem.

CHAPTER XX

HASSAN knew nothing of Huleema's visit. Much against his inclination he spent less time than ever with his mother and Nissa. He was away from his father's palace all day, sometimes returning late at night, too late to pay his customary visit. Unconsciously he looked forward to that hour spent in the hareem; he deluded himself into the belief that it was his mother who attracted him and not his wife; but it was to his wife he turned for the understanding ear and sympathetic response.

The aversion to the blind woman vanished in the daily companionship; and a new and stronger love sprang up, founded on unexpected qualities of mind, of the existence of which he had no suspicion until he made Nissa's acquaintance. As far as was possible the two were becoming fast friends. The very limitations of their intercourse assisted rather than hindered the friendship. He caught himself during the day's work thinking that he would tell Nissa this; she would be amused; or he would ask her to give an opinion on that, she might be able to put the matter in a new light.

At night, as he now and then tossed on his bed after a strenuous day of brainwork, an intense longing assailed him to see her in her proper position—the occupant of the rooms he had specially prepared for her use, the young mistress honoured by the whole establishment, his wife in every sense. At such times he forgot her affliction. The Nissa of his dreams, whether awake or

asleep, always lifted shining beautiful eyes to his, full of responsive love.

In the evening as he sat by his mother and watched the girl, the other side of the picture was forced upon him, and the temptation to alter their relationship lessened. How could she occupy her rooms afflicted as she was? how could she, even with his mother's assistance, take a dignified position in the palace? Every person in that numerous household, from the Shahzada downwards, would despise her for her infirmity and instinctively refuse to render her the honour that should be hers by right of her marriage. Then he stifled his longing and tried to extinguish the fire that was kindling slowly but surely within him.

Fortunately for Hassan he was too busy to have much time for brooding. His appointment as confidential and private secretary kept him fully occupied. His English training fitted him for the post; and no one else of the Nizam's court could do the work he did with the same ability.

Among other things learned in the West was a methodical briskness in all matters of business; a concentration of thought and a quick decision after it. "One thing at a time" was his tutor's adage at Eton; and Hassan had adopted it. He found, however, that in his work at the palace he had to set aside the teaching of school and college and go back to the slow indirect ways of his ancestors.

Whether his services were required immediately or some hours later, he was obliged to be at his post ready to obey His Highness's call at a moment's notice. He was given a luxurious sitting-room, furnished with a large writing-table and other accessories. There were comfortable lounges, a sofa and several tables. These last were covered with books, magazines and newspapers.

It was Hassan's business to open every newspaper that came, and skim its contents. Certain paragraphs that he thought advisable to bring before the notice of

his sovereign, or that he might be called upon to mention, he marked with a pencil; the papers thus marked were piled in order by one of the clerks in an ante-room. Servants and orderlies stood about within call, ready to do his bidding and obey his command. When the summons to the Presence at length arrived, he took up a bundle of papers and followed the officer on duty to the audience chamber.

Having arranged his papers on a table by his side, he waited for directions. The Nizam was a man of few words. His inquiries were frequently for news of the Muslim world, the action of European Powers in North Africa, their relation with their various colonies and with each other. As Hassan read extracts or gave a short summary of the news, he was able to translate into his own tongue from the Western languages, not an easy matter where brevity and conciseness were essential. He learned to be expert also at analysis and in condensing the news into short lucid sentences. He grew very weary at times of the intricacies of foreign politics; but he understood the importance of them to the State. In the case of England being involved in a European war, she might, if she suffered reverses, be obliged to withdraw some of her troops from India. There were considerable tracts where no danger would arise from such an action. Hyderabad with its lawless inhabitants and its proud nobility was not one of those districts; and the ruler of the State was aware of the fact.

Occasionally Hassan was required to drive out with His Highness and attend public functions; or he might be sent to interview the Prime Minister or his secretary, or one of the English officials. Whatever the duty imposed upon him, whether official or private, he performed it to the best of his ability with the intuition and conventional courtesy of the oriental and the integrity of an Englishman.

On Friday, the Muslim Sunday, his presence was not required at the palace till after mid-day; and then, as a rule, only for a short time. Like every good

Muhammadan, he attended the mosque, joined in the responses during the services, listened to the long sermon delivered from the pulpit exhorting him to keep the faith. When the old man's health allowed of it his father accompanied him, and during the fulminations against unbelievers, his eyes were fixed upon his son in the hope that the words were sinking deeply. It is to be feared that Hassan's thoughts were often far away from the preacher and his sermon.

About ten days before the Christmas holidays, on a certain Friday, Hassan sat in his room at home. He had come back from the Nizam's palace in good time, and had found on his table a letter from Derwent in which he expressed his gratitude for his wedding gift. Miss Orban, he said, sent a message of thanks also for his kind remembrance of her. She hoped to be able to repeat those thanks in person when they met at Secunderabad, which she fully anticipated would not be later than January.

Derwent went on to say that she was making good progress, and the doctors spoke confidently of her being able to bear the journey to Secunderabad at the end of the official holidays. She was still helpless, and it was too soon for her to think of standing or walking; but it would all come in time if they were patient. The letter breathed pity all through; and warm admiration for the courage that had carried her on to convalescence without a single break. If she had given way to despondency and grief, matters might not have gone so well with her.

Hassan read it through twice and then laid it down. He leaned back in his chair and sank into deep thought. He had searched it carefully for sign of dissatisfaction at the fate which had overtaken Derwent's intended bride. There was no hint that any sacrifice was being made; on the contrary, a tone of elation and self-congratulation ran through the letter from beginning to end. The Englishman had no fear of his wife presenting him with lame or maimed children.

Knowing the ordinary Englishman as he did, Hassan ought not to have wondered or doubted. An oriental nature lay underneath his Western training and the instincts inherited from many generations died hard. He had recently arrived at a point in his own life where the ancestral instinct had been brought into conflict with the Western teaching of pity. The first impulse had been to obey his instincts without question. Since then he had had time for reflection, and the pendulum began to swing back. His friend's example was assisting in the swinging. If Derwent could do this thing why should he not do it? This was the question round which his mind revolved as he sat there.

Only three days before he was talking with the Nizam's European medical attendant, while the latter waited for a summons to His Highness's private apartment. Derwent was known to be on friendly terms through old associations with Hassan, and his name came up in connection with his approaching marriage. Miss Orban's accident was also alluded to, and Hassan asked whether there was any danger of the infirmity being inherited by her children. The doctor laughed at the suggestion, and assured him that there was no danger whatever of such a thing happening. Neither accidents nor accidental diseases were hereditary, he added.

What of deafness or blindness, Hassan had asked. The doctor replied that they might both be purely accidental. On the other hand, if the family had shown a weakness in respect of either in other members and in former generations, a tendency to deafness and blindness might be inherited. Sometimes deafness arose from an attack of influenza or scarlet fever. In such a case it was accidental and there was no fear of the infirmity being transmitted; any more than there was of Miss Orban's lameness being passed on to her children. Very often in England as well as in the East, deafness and blindness were due to carelessness in the nurture of children; or to ignorant treatment after recovery from

other complaints. The doctor at this point in the conversation had been called away and Hassan was left with food for reflection.

Derwent's letter brought back the subject. He recalled the doctor's words; and an emotion that was stronger than example or precept prompted him to follow his friend's lead. His mother was already in favour of the consummation of his marriage. It was from his father that opposition would come, not a mild indifferent objection, but a strong adamant opposition founded on deeply-rooted prejudice.

Was it right that the younger generation should be trammelled by the laws of the older generation? How was it possible for progress of any kind to take place unless a certain latitude were allowed? The world was changing; opinion was modifying; and modern man must adapt himself to the change and modification if he wished to march with the times.

His reverie was broken by the appearance of a servant with a message from his father, saying that he wished to see him. The customary visit had been paid, and his father had given no sign that he had any communication of importance to make. Hassan wondered vaguely what was in the air. A summons of the kind indicated that it was something of more than usual importance.

He found the Nawab sitting on the screened divan, his feet drawn up and his figure wrapped in a warm chuddar shawl. A manservant fanned the charcoal fire that burned on a brazier near.

The Nawab looked up as his son approached and his forehead was puckered with a frown. It was a shadow of trouble and anxiety rather than of anger. He turned impatiently to the man by the fire and told him to go. The other attendants hanging about the entrance were ordered to retire to the verandah. Then the Shahzada signed to his son to take a chair that had been placed in readiness near the sofa.

"You have sent for me, my father; and I have come.

I hope all is well with your Excellency," said Hassan, in the conventional speech of the country.

"All is not well, my son," replied the Nawab in a fretful tone. "I am failing in health and strength. Each day that passes leaves me weaker. . . ."

"You will be better when this cold weather is gone. The hot season suits you best, even though the heat may be trying at times."

"I don't feel the heat or the cold," the Nawab replied shortly. "It is anxiety that is sending me down to my grave."

"I hope not?" said Hassan with some concern. "There are surely no new anxieties to worry about in our family."

He wondered if Yasin was a cause of trouble. He had seen very little of his brother lately; and it seemed once or twice as if the boy had been unresponsive and inclined to avoid him.

"There were none till you came home. It is the failure of your marriage which is troubling me. When am I to know that there is a prospect of our ancient line being continued?"

He glared at his son from the folds of the shawl; and Hassan, feeling that an answer was expected, murmured something about there being no necessity for haste. His father continued—

"You must marry again. Do you hear, my son? You must marry again and before long. I am an old man. Every day I become weaker. You may see no necessity for haste, but I do."

Hassan stirred uneasily in his chair, dreading lest his father should agitate himself about Nissa's presence in the hareem, and make a request that she should be sent back to her family.

"You are nervous and out of sorts, sir," he said soothingly. "You should send for the doctor and he will give you a tonic. You are stronger and more vigorous than you think. I am sure that you will live, to hear the voices of many grandchildren in the hareem."

"It will be Yasin, then, to whom I shall have to look for a fulfilment of the promise; not you," snapped the Nawab with increasing irritation.

There was a pause. Hassan broke it.

"Father, I have it in my mind to take Nissa as my wife. She is very sweet; and the English doctor says that——"

He was not allowed to proceed. At his proposal the old man started up in horror and wrath. Inherited prejudice rose in revolt at such an unheard-of proposal and he found his tongue at last.

"Make that blind woman the mother of my grandchildren! of the grandson who is to inherit my estate, my honours, my wealth! Madman! what are you thinking of? Never has any woman entered this family who did not bring health and beauty, soundness of sense and limb! and never with my consent shall one who is not perfect be brought in now!"

The Nawab fell back on his cushions exhausted with the passion that swept through him. The long lean fingers that grasped the folds of the soft chuddar trembled, and the glittering deep-set eyes seemed to glow with a light of their own. Hassan feared lest the excitement should be too much for him; but having once launched upon the subject he was determined to lay before his father the course he had under contemplation.

"Nissa was not born blind," he said quietly. "The blindness is an accidental complaint; not an inheritance. There is no reason, so the doctor tells me, why it should be passed on."

"What!" cried the old man, sitting up again and facing his son like a royal tiger disturbed in its lair. "What! is it not due to weakness? Is not all disease due to weakness of constitution? You talk nonsense! I tell you that all illnesses come of infirmity, and infirmity is inherited. You must put this blind woman out of your mind altogether. Regard her as dead or divorced. You must marry again."

As Hassan received the command in a silence which his father construed rightly as dissent to his proposition, he continued hotly—

“I have made choice of your second wife.” Hassan gripped the arms of his chair in his surprise as though he would interrupt with hasty and unconsidered words ; but with an effort he controlled himself, remembering that it was his father who spoke. “She is Huleema Bee.”

“I understood from my brother that Huleema Bee was promised to him,” said Hassan, preserving his self-control with an effort. “That they were to be married with the shahdee ceremonies and that she would occupy an honourable position in the house.”

“Will not her position be as honourable if she is the second wife of my eldest son ? ”

“She could only be married to me by the nikah ceremonies ; the shahdee could not be repeated.”

It was curious to see the resemblance between father and son. As Hassan pronounced the impossibility of a repetition of the shahdee rites, he might have been his own father laying down the law. The old Nawab saw himself in his son, and smiled grimly as he braced himself up for the struggle with an iron determination.

“I do not propose ever to repeat the shahdee ceremonies with you. The nikah is honourable enough. It will suffice for me ; therefore it will suffice for you, my son. The lady Huleema Bee’s family have given their consent and the preliminaries are being settled.”

This time it was Hassan’s turn to frown.

“My consent is also necessary ; it has not been asked, nor has it been given,” he said, vainly trying to keep his annoyance out of his tone.

“It is an understood thing that it follows my command.”

There was a pause. The Nawab was willing to give his son time ; but at the end of that time he confidently expected obedience. Direct disobedience was not to be

thought of for a moment. He continued slowly and clearly as though he were issuing an order to an inferior.

"You shall think it over ; and having well considered my proposition, I am convinced you will see the wisdom of it ; and will fall in with the arrangements I am making."

Still Hassan remained silent. His mind was busy with his friend Derwent. He pictured Derwent's father, the kindly old Warwickshire squire, interfering with his son's love affairs, and ordering him to take a wife of his parents' choosing in place of Delia Orban ! The thought made him smile unconsciously. The Nawab saw the smile and imagined from it that he had prevailed. With a sigh of fatigue he said—

"You may leave me now. I have expressed my wishes"—they were understood by both men to be commands. "The wedding will take place after your return from the shooting expedition."

"What does my brother Yasin say to this change of plans ?" asked Hassan, to whom the whole matter was still hypothetical in spite of the Nawab's words.

"Yasin ? He is not consulted. It is no business of his !" replied the Nawab sharply and in some astonishment at the suggestion.

"He will be bitterly disappointed. He has set his heart on Huleema Bee. Now I understand his behaviour and his avoidance of me. Poor boy ! I am not surprised. I venture to propose that he should be allowed to marry her," said Hassan quietly.

"What unheard-of presumption !" cried the Nawab, rapidly losing his temper. "I think you are forgetting that I rule in this household, I alone, and as long as I continue to live, I continue to rule absolutely master."

He spoke angrily. The chuddar was thrown aside and the right hand was exposed, showing the fingers clenched as though they were closed over some deadly weapon. Hassan rose to his feet. He could see that his father was becoming more agitated every minute

that passed, and that no good could come of prolonging the interview. The two wills were at a variance, and neither intended to yield. This was not the time to struggle. He was unwilling, however, to leave his father under a false impression of what he intended to do.

"The Presence may be master of his household and of his children's nursery ; but when his sons become men their destinies are in the hands of Allah to Whom they and they alone are responsible. I declare before Allah and His Prophet that I will not consent to be forced into a marriage that is not to my liking."

To Hassan's relief and surprise, his father preserved an outward calm.

"Will my son kindly name the family to which he wishes to be allied in his second marriage ? Perhaps in these advanced days he may have already made choice of the lady himself."

"I have !" responded Hassan, with a clear firm voice. "My choice is made. I choose Nissa, and I will have none other ! To-morrow night she shall be brought to me in her bridal dress and jewels. She shall come to the room I have prepared for her, and she will meet with a very different reception this time from the first. Fool that I was to spurn her ! my pearl ! my rose ! the delight of my heart !"

He did not wait for the floodgates of wrath to be opened ; but with a low salaam, turned and left the room swiftly before his father in his amazement and consternation could speak.

CHAPTER XXI

HASSAN returned to his room with rank rebellion in his heart. It was not so much against the action of his father as against the system that prompted the action. The methods of Young England were fresh in his mind. He found himself contrasting the ways of the progressive West with the conservatism of his own nation. Was a man never to be allowed to act and think for himself? His father might live another fifteen or twenty years. Was his son to submit to be governed like an ignorant unreasonable child all those years?

The example of Derwent was ever in his mind, inciting him to think for himself and distinguish between custom and doctrine; to break away from what was virtually custom only; although from long and rigid practice it had grown to be regarded as doctrine.

Instead of waiting till his usual hour for visiting his mother, he made a new departure; he sent a message to his mother asking her if she could see him at once.

He intended to take a firm line with the inmates of the hareem and to exercise authority over his wife. He would give a definite order, a command virtually, which he had a right to expect would be obeyed. Nissa Bee was to be clothed in her bridal dress and jewels on the following night; and she was to be led to the room he had prepared for her, for he was determined that the marriage should be consummated in spite of his father's prejudices. The message sent to his mother was a demand rather than a request, the reason given for it being that he wished to consult her on a matter of importance.

There would be a terrible upheaval and conflict of

wills no doubt, and the Shahzada would storm at him and fulminate wrathful threats; but Hassan was confident that the old man would come round in the end. He had no other son living but Yasin to take Hassan's place. Pride alone if nothing else would reconcile him in course of time to his son's independent action.

To his surprise Fazeela appeared as the bearer of his mother's reply. The Bibi had a headache and was lying down. Would he be so good as to wait until the usual hour for his visit? By that time her head would probably be better. Fazeela was scrupulously polite and her speech was smooth and conciliatory, at the same time she showed an unyielding front in her opposition to the visit being paid before the usual time.

There was no help for it but to be patient—a difficult task in his present mood. He had waited too long as it was.

He asked if Nissa could give him an interview instead. Fazeela put him off with an excuse. His wife was with Mrs. Barstow. It would be a pity to disturb the regular hour of study. Mrs. Barstow was reading aloud to her. Would it not do if the Presence spoke to her in the evening when he came to see his mother. As he expressed dissatisfaction, she offered to go at once and let Nissa know of his wishes, an offer he accepted. The message he gave amounted to a command.

Fazeela hurried away as though she would serve his interests before all others. After a short absence she returned. Nissa Bee begged that her lord would forgive her if she asked him to defer the interview till the evening. It would be very inconvenient to receive him now; she threw herself at his feet and prayed for forgiveness. Fazeela rattled on with a succession of conventional phrases that were not convincing, since they bespoke her own personality and not that of the gentle Nissa.

Hassan knew the ways of the hareem only too well.

He strongly suspected that no message had been given to Nissa at all. Fazeela was drawing on her imagination in formulating the reply and would continue to play the same game just as long as he chose to be fooled. It was irritating ; but there was no help for it. He had to submit with the best grace he could command.

He might, if he chose, force his way into the hareem and demand an interview ; but it would only make confusion and frighten the timid flock. Nissa, scolded and warned beforehand by Fazeela till she was utterly confused, would be unable to answer his questions coherently. He would defeat his own ends by any show of violence. The commands he intended to give to her personally must be issued calmly and firmly. Nissa must above all be encouraged to act on her own responsibility ; and she must understand that she was making choice between himself and his father. For her to do this it was necessary that she should trust in her husband's power to protect her from any violence on the part of the Shahzada under whose roof she was living. He must be careful to guard against anything that would contribute to the loss of her presence of mind.

He therefore acquiesced in the postponement of his visit ; and dismissed Fazeela, consoling himself with the thought that the delay would give him time for various little matters that required his attention.

His first act was to go to the rooms he had prepared for Nissa. He had not entered them since the fatal night of his wedding. They were in perfect order, dusted and arranged as though in everyday use.

He called the two servants in whose charge they had been left and gave a few orders as to their rearrangement. Some of the ornaments bought specially to please Nissa's eyes were put away under his directions. Then not approving of the change he ordered them all back again.

The time passed quickly as his mind occupied itself in devising ways in which he might make amends to his

neglected bride for the slight he had put upon her. He would be there to receive her when she came. She should not be left alone to grope in her darkness for him ; she should be led by his mother to his longing arms. With the lights turned down her eyes would not flaunt their infirmity in his face. He would forget it ; he had forgotten it already. The old horror was gone and it would never return. He had become used to her affliction, and had learned from Mrs. Barstow how to lend her his eyes. Her helplessness and growing dependence on him had only strengthened his love. There was something more than love between them now, and that was companionship : which was becoming very dear to him. The evening visit sufficed with regard to his mother ; but it was not enough with regard to Nissa. He wanted to see her in the morning on awaking ; he wanted to find her in her room next his on his return from his work ; she must be at hand to welcome him, to listen to all he had to tell ; and above all she must let him taste the full measure of love without the critical eye of Fazeela to watch every action in jealous disapproval.

Again and again he told himself that Nissa's infirmity, like Delia Orban's accident, was entirely due to chance ; it was not a weakness of constitution. She was physically and mentally sound except in that one particular, which the doctor gave him to understand was not hereditary.

At the appointed hour he went to his mother's room. She was alone ; and as he entered her eyes watched him with a strange longing, which he, full of his own thoughts, failed to observe. When he leaned over her to give her the customary kiss she did a very unusual thing. She flung an arm round his neck and drew his cheek to hers till it rested there. He felt her tremble ; but it was momentary. The door of her heart from habitual reserve shut immediately. The spasmodic embrace ended as suddenly as it began and the arm that encircled him dropped limply to her side. The lids

veiled her eyes from which she could not entirely quench the fire kindled there by the sight of her son.

"I was summoned by my father this afternoon," said Hassan as he took his seat close to her couch.

"I knew ; I heard of it."

"From my father ?"

"Not in person. I have not seen him yet. I am going to him after I have talked with you, my son."

"Who told you that the Shahzada sent for me ?" he demanded abruptly, as a suspicion entered his mind.

"Fazeela ; his message was brought by her."

"Of course ! I might have known that she would be somewhere within hearing !" he said angrily. "I suppose she was hiding behind the screen." As his mother maintained silence, he continued with increasing irritation : "How you can put up with such prying I can't think ! Why don't you give her a pension and send her to our house in the city ?"

"She does no harm here and she is very good to me," said the Begum quietly. "Remember that she is your father's wife—less honourably placed than I am ; but nevertheless his legal wife with a right to live under his roof and have a separate establishment of her own. This has never been necessary——"

"——thanks to your forbearance and gentleness, mother !" interrupted Hassan with some warmth. "It would have been better for you if you had given her what she was legally entitled to, and sent her to live in our city palace."

The Begum with her customary reserve did not commit herself to an opinion as to the wisdom of allowing Fazeela to live with her. After a slight pause she said—

"All her interests are bound up with the interests of the family. She looks upon you as an elder son and is willing to sacrifice Yasin's prospects for your benefit."

"For which I am not grateful. I resent her interference ; she is not my mother and I regard her interest, as you call it, as impertinence. For some time past I have

disapproved of her manner towards Nissa ; it is not respectful ; more than that, it is often rude and unkind."

"The reason is not far to seek. Nissa's position in the house—the rejected bride of the eldest son—does not command respect from any member of the family." She paused and then added : "You have only yourself to blame for all that has happened and will happen."

It was seldom that the Begum expressed an opinion so definitely ; and still more rare for her to blame any member of the family. She could command when necessary ; but she was too gentle and lethargic to be a dominant or critical spirit in the hareem. The words were spoken very quietly ; but for all that they hurt him. He sprang to his feet and began to pace the room in his agitation.

"You are right. As I told my father, I have only myself to blame," he repeated. "I recognize my mistake and I mean to rectify it with as little delay as possible. I suppose Fazeela repeated all that passed between my father and myself?"

Again the mother's gaze dwelt upon her son as though fear lay behind the anxiety that clouded her delicate face.

"I believe she told me all," she replied in a low voice.

"My father proposed that I should marry Huleema Bee."

"Since you have rejected Nissa it seems the only way to remedy the mischief, and bring about the fulfilment of your father's wishes. He takes the trouble to heart to such an extent that it is undermining his health."

"I no longer reject Nissa," he cried, stopping before his mother and looking at her with shining eyes. "If Fazeela told you everything, she must have mentioned my answer to the Shahzada's proposition. I refused point-blank to marry Huleema Bee. I told him that I would take Nissa, and she should be my wife in truth. She shall be placed at once in her proper position, and

I will kneel at her feet and ask for forgiveness for my cruel treatment of her."

He gave his mother no opportunity of replying or of making any comment. Words poured in a torrent from his lips as he issued his commands. Nissa was to be dressed as a bride once more with flowers and jewels. His mother herself was to lead her to the room he had prepared. To-morrow night she was to be brought to him with every honour possible to show. He would have been pleased if it could have been carried out that very evening. It would be difficult to wait for a whole night and day. Apparently there was no help for it but to be patient, since it was only due to Nissa that she should be brought with honour; but in the name of Allah and His Prophet, had not he and Nissa already waited long enough!

To all of which and a great deal more the Begum listened in silence as she rested among her cushions, her head upon her hand and her dark eyes gathering clouds of trouble in their depths. In the half light of her room he failed to see the warning.

He paused at last; and in the silence that ensued he became aware of an absence of response on the part of his mother. It was like a dash of cold water on his ardour. He caught his breath, dropped into the seat by her side and leaned towards her with a new doubt in his mind.

"Mother! is it possible that you have changed? that you are not with me in this matter? It is not so long ago since you yourself were advocating this very course. Then it was I who held back." As the Begum did not answer his questions, he continued: "You love Nissa; you know her to be all that man could desire except—except in that one respect. For weeks I have seen her here by your side; and during that time my love has grown till—till——"

He stopped and looked at her. A tear slowly trickled down her smooth cheek. She drew out an embroidered handkerchief and put it to her eyes.

"Then you side with my father," said Hassan, coldly drawing himself up and half rising from his seat as though he would leave her. She put out a detaining hand.

"Stay! don't go; I must speak although you will not like what I have to say," she said with an effort. "Listen, dear son; you have lived so long in foreign lands that you have forgotten the position of women in your own country. Here, we in the hareem rule in small matters and the men in great. In the West, Mrs. Barstow tells me, that the women rule if they choose in great matters, and allow the men to have their way in small things. However that may be, your father governs our destinies here, yours and mine, as well as those of the rest of the household. He has expressed his wishes through Fazeela——" The mention of Fazeela was the signal for another outburst.

"Fazeela! indeed! why doesn't he speak to you directly instead of making her the go-between?"

"He has behaved with perfect politeness," she said in justification of her husband, who was in the right. "He could not send for me as he summoned Fazeela as if I were a servant. A request has come by her asking me if I will honour him with a visit after I have seen you. He will then tell me of the arrangements he has made for you; arrangements which he hopes I shall assist him in carrying out."

"And if you say you will not help him, what then?"

"Such a thing cannot be said to the Shahzada. The head of the house, as I told you just now, must be obeyed."

"Will you let me know exactly what"—he paused for an expression, hesitating to use the word command or order—"what his wishes are?"

"They are that on your return from your shooting expedition your marriage with Huleema Bee by the nikah rites shall take place; and preparations for the wedding are to be made during your absence."

Hassan controlled himself with an effort, but a fire

of opposition underlay the quiet words he spoke in reply.

"You heard from Fazeela what reply I made to that proposal. I gave him to understand that I would never consent to such a marriage. If he forces me into it, I will not live with Huleema Bee. I repeat, Nissa shall be my wife in deed as well as word, and she shall come to me to-morrow."

The Begum shook her head.

"She will not come," she said sadly.

"I say that she will! she shall! I will ask her consent, of course, but I know it will be given. She will fly to my arms like the Nissa of old——"

Again the Begum made a movement of dissent.

"Call her here at once," he said imperiously. "Call her and let me explain how matters stand. Let me hear from her own lips that she is willing to come. I will not be forced myself, and I will not force an unwilling wife to come to me. If she asks me of her own free will to allow matters to remain as they are, and gives me a good reason for her request, I shall say, 'So let it be!' Then it is possible that I may reconsider the advisability of marrying some woman who will give my father the grandson he craves for; but it will not be Huleema Bee. She is promised to Yasin, and I refuse to upset our friendly relations by coming between him and the bride he has set his heart on."

The Begum's head bent lower still. She made no attempt to call her daughter-in-law, nor to reply to her son's impetuous speech. Impatiently Hassan turned from his mother, at a loss to understand her attitude. He knew that she still retained her old power over his father, although she rarely exercised it. The Shahzada had a great respect for her opinion; and though he would not be ruled, he might be persuaded to listen to reason and to modify his decree. He waited; then impatience getting the better of him, he clapped his hands to summon a servant. Fazeela appeared instantly as though she were expecting the call.

"Oh ! it is you, little mother," he said, slightly taken aback at her sudden appearance, "Listening as usual ! Then you know what I want,—a servant, please, to carry a message."

"To whom, my son ?" asked Fazeela with polite deference, ignoring the accusation of eaves-dropping, an accusation that did not trouble her in the least ; since it was not considered in any way underhand or derogatory to her dignity to practise it.

"To take my salaams to the Sahiba Nissa Bee, and ask her to come and speak to her husband ; he has something to say."

Fazeela did not turn to do his bidding nor call for a servant.

"It is impossible to execute your Excellency's commands," she replied with a still greater show of courtesy, and a smile she did not attempt to hide.

"Why ?" he asked.

"Because the Sahiba Nissa Bee has left the house."

CHAPTER XXII

"How? What?" he shouted as he once more bounded to his feet. "Left the house! What do you mean?"

"What I say, Excellency. She is not here," answered Fazeela, a note of sharpness in her voice.

He turned from her with an exclamation of smothered rage and disappointment.

"Mother! will you explain? Is she telling me the truth?" he cried.

The Begum buried her head on her pillows. Her self-restraint gave way and she began to sob in uncontrollable grief. At the sight of her distress Fazeela grew grave again.

"It is a pity," she said severely, "that Nissa was not sent back to her people the day after the wedding. It was the wish of the Shahzada; but he yielded to your mother's pleading, and she was allowed to stop here. You have looked too often upon her beauty till you have forgotten everything else. The Shahzada has rightly decided that this foolishness must come to an end. She is gone, and you will not see her again——"

"I tell you I will see her again!" replied Hassan, interrupting angrily. "Not only will I see her, but I will take her under my protection and live with her. Too long have I neglected my duty and my rights!" In his wrath he strode up and down the room, Fazeela watching him as she had many times watched his father when he was labouring under similar emotion due to other causes. "Does any man, father or sovereign, dare to come between husband and wife? I have only to appeal to His Highness and he will see me righted."

"His Highness is too wise to interfere in the domestic affairs of his nobles," said Fazeela with a comfortable assurance. "You ask if any man dares to come between husband and wife. Have you been away from home so long that you have forgotten the duty of parents towards their children, and their right to interfere if they see fit?"

He turned from her with impatience and again addressed his mother.

"Tell me! tell me where is Nissa?"

"I don't know," replied the Begum in a voice she commanded with difficulty.

"Do you know?" he asked of Fazeela.

"I see no reason why you should not be told everything," she answered. She had no scruples about hurting his feelings. "The Shahzada did not bind us to secrecy. Nissa was taken this afternoon to her own home. She was well received; and it was arranged between the Shahzada and her father that she remains with her mother until your second marriage has been accomplished. After the wedding the offer will be made for her to return. It will rest entirely with Nissa Bee herself whether she comes to us again. She will be allowed to do as she chooses."

While she was speaking Hassan's eyes were bent upon her in fierce unbelief.

"Are you telling me the truth?" he asked.

"By the Prophet, I am!" she cried with the first sign of indignation she had shown throughout the interview.

"I don't believe you!" he said; and Fazeela lost her temper.

"It was the one mistake of the Shahzada's life when he sent you to England! It has only taught you to be disobedient and unfaithful to all our most sacred traditions——"

"That will do, sister; you are forgetting yourself!" said the Begum, who had recovered from her fit of weeping. She sat up and looked sadly at her son.

"Fazeela speaks the truth; Nissa is gone and you must be patient. It will be best to submit to your father. When you come back you will think differently, and be more reconciled to his arrangements for your future, and if you will only believe it, for your happiness."

"We shall see! I think not!" he replied hotly, adding more temperately and with a great effort at self-control, "Did Nissa go willingly to-day or was she removed by force?"

"She went quite willingly with Mrs. Barstow."

"Was she told of my father's designs?"

"I said nothing of them," replied the Begum with an apprehensive glance at Fazeela.

"But I did!" put in Fazeela quickly. "I explained everything. I told her that the Shahzada demanded a grandson; and that since you objected to a second marriage as long as your first wife was living under your roof, it would be best for her to go."

He clenched his hands in his anger and disappointment as he resumed his walk.

"What did she say to all this information?" he demanded, stopping before Fazeela and looking down upon her with an angry light in his eye.

"Nothing! she bowed to the will of Allah; and you would do well to follow her example."

As Fazeela spoke, her lips curved slightly in the triumph of the Shahzada over his unruly son. The Begum, on the contrary, again showed signs of distress. It hurt her more than he knew to see him thwarted and angered thus. She was torn two ways between her love for her son and her time-honoured duty to her husband. She feared for the consequences of Hassan's opposition. It would enrage and distress the Nawab; perhaps it would drive the old man—already far from well—into a dangerous illness.

"Nissa left a message for you," said Fazeela presently.

"What was it?" he asked in a choked voice.

"She prayed Allah to keep you from all harm ; and she begged you not to trouble yourself about her absence. You are to act in this matter of remarriage as you think best. But whatever you elect to do she submits."

He turned to the Begum.

"Oh ! mother ! Nissa is a woman in a thousand ! Fool that I was to reject her ! It serves me right ! It is a just reward for my cruelty ! And now, when I would make amends, ask her forgiveness, put her in her right position, she is taken away from me ! Whether by my father's orders or because she has been persuaded that it will be for my benefit, she is gone ; and I have only myself to thank !"

"My son ! it is the will of God !" said the Begum, her eyes swimming again.

"That is so !" quickly rejoined Fazeela. "We ought to thank Allah for it ! Mercifully He steps in between a madman and the deeds he would do. It would be well to carry out the Shahzada's first suggestion and divorce Nissa," she added, finding that moody silence prevailed.

He turned on her furiously, and in spite of her assured position in his father's house she shrank from the young man who would one day rule her destiny.

"Divorce ! Never ! Nissa may divorce me if she likes ; but I will never divorce her !" he cried, standing over Fazeela as though he would have cut her down on the spot if he had had a weapon in his hand.

He looked a picturesque Muslim, untamed by the West in spite of the dinner suit he wore. To his English companions this side of his character had never been revealed. The passion, the thwarted love, the wrath and the instinctive desire to ride roughshod over all who opposed him, transformed the quiet well-regulated European gentleman into an autocratic despot of the East. He addressed his mother again, finding that it was easier than speaking to Fazeela.

"Tell my father that if he wants Huleema for a

daughter-in-law he may go to Yasin. He will find the boy more complaisant than he will find me." For answer the Begum buried her face in her cushions once more. He raised both his hands to emphasize what he was going to say. "I swear before Allah that unless Nissa herself of her own free will commands me I will not marry Huleema."

As he spoke a figure advanced through the purdah. It was Yasin. The boy ran forward and fell at his brother's feet.

"May Allah bless you for those words, my brother! May His Prophet grant that it shall be so. If Nissa commands it! but I know that she never will command such a thing; she loves you too well!"

"Little brother! I have one word more to add. Not only will I have Nissa's consent, but I will also ask for yours before I submit to my father's outrageous request."

"And that I, Yasin, will never give!"

Without waiting for another word Hassan turned on his heel and disappeared down the passage that led to his wife's room.

CHAPTER XXIII

THERE was silence. The Begum lifted her aching head and listened to her son's retreating footsteps. She was between the devil and the deep sea, if she only knew it; and the prospect gave no assurance of peace for herself. Her warm human instinct told her that Hassan's impulse was right; and that the Nawab's commands were ill-judged and premature.

"It is a mistake, sister, to hurry in this way. It would have been better to have waited for the boy's return from his shooting expedition," she said as Fazeela bent over her with concern, offering her a restorative draught.

"We have delayed action too long," replied Fazeela tartly. She intended to combat the softness of heart on the Begum's part which had already worked so much mischief. "If Nissa remained here, who could answer for the consequences? The young Shahzada—how like he is to His Excellency!—is headstrong enough to carry the girl off to his room at any minute and lock the doors against us. He was ready to do so this very night. In these days the hareem is no longer safe from the violence of the younger generation."

"He would never go against my wishes to that extent," said the Begum in defence of her son.

"Bibi! is it certain that he would be acting against your wishes if he forcibly took Nissa to himself?"

The Begum made no reply. She knew that Fazeela only hinted at the truth. The draught provided an excuse for her silence and she handed back the cup.

"Allah be praised," continued Fazeela as she fussed

about; "that the danger is removed. A tiger does little harm where there are no village cattle to tempt him. Dry your eyes, Bibi ; it is time you went to the Shahzada. Say as little as you can or he will not sleep in spite of the draught I intend to give him to-night. I will take you to his room myself."

She turned to Yasin, who stood near the doorway aware that a storm was gathering. The eyes that rested on him glittered with suppressed rage.

"Go to my room and wait there till I return. I want to speak to you," she said in a tone which he knew of old as presaging reproof and punishment.

He shrugged his shoulders and bent his head as though he were preparing to face a veritable cyclone. Hassan's totally unexpected promise had brought a rift in the clouds that had lately overshadowed the sunny careless temperament. His spirits came back with a rush ; and though sobered by recent events he was as ready as ever to put his hand to any piece of harmless mischief that might present itself. His heart warmed towards his loyal elder brother as it had never warmed before ; and he felt that he could have gone through fire and water for Hassan if he had been called upon to do so. Since the stolen meeting with Huleema in his mother's room, Yasin's love was no longer founded upon imagination. It was a veritable passion growing in depth as it fed upon memory. The Nawab's proposal to marry her to his elder brother had been a bitter trial, which bid fair to breed life-long enmity between the two brothers. It had already engendered jealousy and resentment. Now they were both swept away in one moment. Hassan's assurance had been made spontaneously. Yasin need no more fear that Hassan would rob him of his bride—for he still looked upon her as such.

The interview with the Nawab was soon over, since the Begum took care to listen in silence and offer no remark that might rouse his ire against herself, or provoke further irritation against her unfortunate son.

His anger was still smouldering; and it would have taken very little to make it flame up again. In the face of her meek silence he soon talked himself out and then the reaction set in. Tired and overwrought, he dismissed her, bidding Fazeela with some tenderness to take care of the Bibi and do all she could to soften the grief caused by a disobedient son.

The atmosphere of the palace was charged with suppressed excitement. The relatives, the servants, the numerous retainers, guards, peons, mahouts, gardeners, watchmen, even the band of scavengers and sweepers knew that trouble was brewing between the prince and his son; and there were whispered discussions within the walls, and heated arguments outside, as men and women took sides and sympathized with the head of the house and his heir. Watchful attendants were ready to minister to the needs of master and mistress. Fazeela, having seen the Begum back to her room and summoned the three women whose duty it was to assist her in her toilet when she rose or went to bed, left her and hurried to Yasin.

She found him extended on her sofa, the pillows comfortably disposed to give him the maximum of luxurious ease. He had been indulging in daydreams revived by the new hope. At the same time, he had taken advantage of an oversight of his mother who had left a dish of tempting European sweets upon the table near her divan. They had shrunk considerably, and Fazeela removed the dish with a snort of annoyance out of his reach. She was particularly addicted to French chocolates and marrons glacés.

"Get up, Yasin," she said sharply. "It is time you went to bed."

"No hurry, mother; I am not sleepy."

"I am! Aiyoh!" she sighed. "It has been a long day of trouble for us all; and I have a rebellious son to increase my trouble."

"You make a mistake about me," replied Yasin with a melancholy expression. "It is Hassan who has been

giving trouble, to say nothing of the Shahzada himself, may the Prophet preserve him ! It seems to me that he is getting into his dotage."

"How dare you speak of your father in that way !" she said angrily. "Since Hassan returned we have had nothing but worry ; and it is all brought about by the foolish teaching of that foreign land."

"You said that you wanted to talk to me," remarked Yasin, rising lazily to his feet and stretching himself with a sleepy yawn that belied his assertion of wakefulness.

"Ah ! that reminds me ! I want to know who asked you to come to the Begum's room without being invited ?"

"No one ; I came——"

"And how dare you take your brother's part against his parents ! All that talk about giving up Huleema Bee was nonsense ! and you thanked him for his foolishness ! What is the world coming to when sons presume to choose their own wives ? Did any one ever hear of such impertinence ?"

"The men of other nations do it, so Hassan says, and he and I do not see why we should not follow their example," replied Yasin boldly.

His words raised a perfect storm, to the raging of which he bowed his head. The outburst was a relief to the overwrought woman, and when it was over, with all its attendant abuse, Fazeela felt better and Yasin felt no worse. He remembered these tempests of old and was seasoned.

"Let me tell you, you young budmash ! that the Shahzada's word in this house is law, and he will prove stronger in the end than both his sons. Hassan will be married to Huleema——"

"I think not," put in Yasin.

"I tell you it is fixed to take place eight weeks from now, and so you may go to your room with my assurance that it will certainly come to pass."

Yasin looked inclined to argue the point, but on second thoughts came to the conclusion that it would be

best to drop the subject for the present. So confident was he in Hassan's good faith, he felt that he could afford to be magnanimous and allow his mother to go uncontradicted.

"We shall see," he said quietly. "After all, I haven't yet given you my reason for coming to the Bibi's room. I looked in here to find you and guessed that you were with her. I wanted to tell you what day of the month it was."

"Day of the month!" she repeated in sudden consternation.

"Are you aware that it is the 13th?"

"The 13th! Aiyoh! Why didn't we remember it? No wonder the young Shahzada spoke as he did! No wonder that everything went wrong! Why didn't I think of it? You ought to have come sooner and reminded me."

Yasin regarded her with a gratification he could hardly disguise.

"Twice I started out to tell you, and was driven back. The first time I met my cousin and he asked me where I was going in such a hurry. Was I going to catch the Bombay mail? He meant it only in fun, but there it was, the unlucky question which makes the errand good for naught. Of course I had to turn back and wait. The second time I got as far as the passage, when the black cat crossed my path. It turned and spat at me. What could I do but go back once more?"

He gazed at her with a melancholy expression of concern that entirely deceived her into the belief that he sympathized deeply.

"This is a most unlucky house!" she cried tearfully. "Nothing but misfortune has befallen it ever since your brother has returned. If he had remembered the day of the week and the date of the month, when he left the station door and had passed out by another way, everything would have gone smoothly."

"What I cannot understand," said Yasin thoughtfully, "is why you persist in your course, you and my

father, when so many signs are against you. If you and the Bibi set yourselves to try and persuade the Shahzada to allow Hassan to take Nissa, and to give his permission to my marriage with Huleema, all this trouble would cease. I am sure, if you consult any wise woman, she will say the same."

His words had too much truth in them to please Fazeela. She replied obstinately and with some warmth.

"The Shahzada is right, and his commands shall not be called in question by an impertinent upstart like yourself. Shame on you for an irreverent son! They shall be carried out to the letter. Now go! I am tired and worn out with all this trouble."

He departed, and as he left the warning chirrup of a wall lizard fell on her ears. During the night she was kept awake by a solitary owl, whose melancholy hoot sounded outside her window at intervals until the break of day. Yasin did not sleep either, but it was not troubled thoughts that kept him awake.

CHAPTER XXIV

THERE was another member of the family to whom sleep was denied that night ; this was Hassan. The discovery of the absence of his wife disturbed him more than a little. He was not afraid that any harm would come to her. She would be subject to no ill-treatment whatever ; on the contrary, she would be well-cared for and surrounded by every comfort money could buy.

The disturbing part of the incident lay in the fact that he had been outwitted and defeated. He had been thwarted like a child who had expressed unreasonable desires. He clearly understood that Nissa's return to her own home had been due to an order issued by the Shahzada himself. She had doubtless gone back loaded with presents. Letters and messages probably went with her, carrying promises of her reinstatement in her husband's house after his return from his shooting expedition. The visit to her father during her husband's absence was not likely to raise any suspicions in her own home of a dispute between the head of the house and his son.

Hassan fretted under the indignity of his treatment. He was irritated at not being allowed to have a voice in the disposal of his wife ; and he was furiously angry at being disappointed in his design of establishing her in the room he had prepared.

Now that she was at last out of reach he discovered that there were fifty things he wanted to say ; fifty questions he wanted to ask. Chief among them was whether she would forgive him and come to him as his wife. Over and over again did he curse himself for his

folly, for his tardiness in making reparation. The more he dwelt upon it the more did he long for the moment when he could offer her compensation for all she had suffered.

He rose early and almost before the sun's rays fell on the cool dewy earth, he walked to Mrs. Barstow's bungalow, which was close to the palace in a corner of the grounds. He was told by the head servant that she was not in. She had left the day before for her holiday. Hassan asked where it was to be spent. The man thought that the mem-sahib had gone to Madras, but he was not sure. The Shahzada had given her leave to go at once, and she had departed sooner than was expected. Hassan asked for her address. He salaamed low as he regretted that he was unable to fulfil the commands of the Presence. Mrs. Barstow had left no address. He inquired when she would be returning. The man thought it might be in two weeks' time, but it might be longer. He further informed the Huzoor that the mem-sahib had left many of her personal properties behind, which must mean that she would be coming back before long.

Hassan listened with a growing conviction that he had mastered the intricacies of the plot. Mrs. Barstow had been hurried away without being allowed to speak to Nissa again, and Nissa herself had accepted everything on the understanding that the arrangements had been made with her husband's consent. If Nissa was deceived, he was not, and he had no intention of submitting without protest and strenuous opposition. They might flatter themselves that he was defeated, but he would prove them wrong in their supposition.

As soon as he reached his sitting-room he wrote a letter to her father and asked if he might call and see his wife. He wished to have an interview before he left. The messenger brought back an answer in polite and flowery language, readily granting the request.

Hassan started early for the Nizam's palace, taking his father-in-law's house on the way. He was received

with ceremonious courtesy and his demand was listened to with deferential politeness. Nissa's father, a handsome old Muhammadan, with upright figure and a pair of keen eyes, expressed himself perfectly willing to accede to the request; but his daughter had left that very morning with her mother to go to his house in the city. If Hassan would like to see her there, he would send an order that he should be received with due respect and honour, as a son of the family, by his brother, Nissa's uncle, who was in residence. He inquired what time Hassan proposed to pay the visit and was told that it would be some time in the afternoon.

Pleading that he must go on at once to the Nizam's palace Hassan departed, harassed and disappointed, rebellion stronger than ever in his heart. It was difficult not to show his vexation. His father-in-law paid him the compliment of seeing him to the entrance. As they moved to the verandah followed by a number of servants, the courtly old man assured him again and again that his daughter was quite well; that she was overjoyed at being with her mother once more. He added that she would return to her husband as soon as he came back from the shooting expedition which he understood from his father, the Nawab, was to be made in company with an English lord. He asked if the English noble had brought his jewels with him; whether the handles of the rifles were inlaid with gold and precious stones, and how many servants he employed; whether they outnumbered his own; to all of which Hassan was obliged to reply before he could get away.

The chauffeur was ordered to hurry back to the palace of the Nawab that orders might be given for the necessary preparations for the visit to the city. It was impossible to pay the call unattended in the motor-car. He must ride there on one of his father's elephants, accompanied by a suitable escort of armed men. They had to be summoned from the city as they were mostly housed there. Then he went to his duties, trying

without much success to forget his own troubles, and give his mind to his secretarial work. He intended to ask for leave for the afternoon; but it was not necessary. The Nizam was engaged with a social function where the presence of his secretary was not required, and Hassan was at liberty for the rest of the day after twelve o'clock.

The motor brought him back at one o'clock, and he was met by a servant bearing a message from his father. The Nawab wished to see him as soon as he could come to his room. Hassan went at once and found his father in a calmer mood. The old man seemed better, and his manner was more cheerful. The irritation of the previous day had passed to his son's great relief.

"You are going into the city, I am told," was his greeting as Hassan made his usual salutation.

"I am going to speak to my wife and arrange with her for her immediate return. When I depart it will be time enough for her to think of paying her people a visit. She had no right to leave the house without my consent; however, I shall not reproach her as I do not hold her responsible for her action," said Hassan, speaking very clearly and quietly.

He fully anticipated an outburst of angry opposition with a declaration that he should not bring his wife back into the family without his father's consent; but it did not come. The Nawab answered quietly—

"Very well, my son. I should like to make a request. In these extraordinary times things seem to be reversed. It is apparently for parents to beg and sons to command."

"I am ready to obey any reasonable command, sir, but I cannot meekly consent to any interference between myself and my wife. Huzoor! did any man ever try to come between your Excellency and my mother, the Begum?"

The Nawab's eyes shone; the old spirit was roused by his son's words.

"Your mother was the most beautiful woman in the

Deccan when she was given to me," he said as his mind flew back to the days when he was young and strong. "I took her; and if it had been necessary, by my sword I would have held her. Had you taken Nissa, our mouths would have been shut, and there would have been no going back, no rectifying of the mistake. No! don't speak! Hear me out to the end," he said, raising his hand to check an impatient protest. "You acted rightly and I thank Allah and His Prophet that you were guided to reject her. All the same I see that this thing is preying on your mind. I have called you here to tell you that if you see Nissa, and if she wishes to return to my house, she may do so."

Hassan knelt before his father in gratitude that was too deep for words.

"But remember this!" continued the Nawab, his voice raised in solemn warning, and his speech slow and distinct. "I do not consent to your coming together as man and wife. In the event of your acting contrary to my wishes, and a son being born to you of a blind woman, *a blind woman*," he repeated, "you must be prepared for disinheritance."

"I accept the responsibility, sir," answered Hassan.

"You are going into the city to try to see Nissa at her father's palace, I hear."

"That is what I intend doing."

"You will go with a proper following. The escort has been sent for. Your brother Yasin will ride at the head of it. You will have my own elephant; and I ask you to take care that you receive due respect and honour as my eldest son; and that my name is not disgraced in the eyes of the city. Now you may leave me. May Allah preserve you from evil, my son, the evil of your own headstrong nature."

Hassan was touched by his father's gentleness. It was unexpected and therefore the more welcome. It freed him from the terrible feeling of antagonism that had racked him ever since he had openly refused on the previous day to do his father's bidding in the matter

of remarriage. Hope sprang up once more. Perhaps in the end all might yet come right. If he could get Nissa's consent to return that very day, he would face the risk of disinheritance and a hundred other risks as well, to obtain the fulfilment of a desire that was becoming well-nigh insupportable.

An hour later, mounted on an elephant hung with scarlet velvet trappings, Hassan entered the gate of the city. A body of mounted men fully armed clattered round him with Yasin at their head. The horses ambled along with a peculiar shuffling gait to keep pace with the stride of the big beast they were accompanying. The sowars were a queer band, fierce and warlike in temperament and by tradition. Many of them were Rohillas; the rest were Arabs and Rajputs. They were fully armed; shields were slung across their backs, swords swung at their sides; and their broad belts were full of daggers and pistols. Fighting was their trade and they plied it on every possible occasion.

The narrow streets of the city were full of people passing to and fro. Not far from the city gate sat a group of faqirs. They were clothed in rags that had not seen the dhoby's tank for many a long day. The original colour of the material had long since been lost under the dust and mud of continuous wanderings. Some of them had allowed their hair to grow, and it hung in greasy matted strands over their shoulders. Others had smeared their foreheads and breasts with ashes. All alike stared vacantly with blood-shot eyes revealing the use of hemp and opium. If they were not actually insane when they entered on their career they had become so with the use of drugs.

As the elephant bell clanged, and the accoutrements of the guard clashed, the faqirs raised their voices and demanded alms. Yasin took a handful of small silver coins from a pouch that he wore and threw them to the ascetics. A number of young men attached as disciples gathered up the money, and the clamour for alms changed into a storm of blessings, shouted at the party

in a harsh discordant chorus, and Hassan was allowed to pass on.

The sun shone with tropical radiance, lighting up the garments worn by the various people who thronged the streets. No one thought of keeping to the side of the road. Pedestrians and bullock carts, carriages, motor-cars, elephants and escorts were all mixed up in the streets without any observance of the rule of the road. The drivers shouted; the chauffeurs hooted on every variety of horn; the bells on passing elephants rang continuously as the huge animals moved warily, and avoided the jostling crowds with wonderful sagacity and patience. They were far less dangerous to the careless people than the motor-cars driven by natives who accounted for every rash act by ascribing the consequences to kismet.

Suddenly Yasin, riding at the head of the procession, gave the word of command to halt. Hassan looked down from his gilded howdah and saw a faqir sitting in the middle of the road. By his side and lying across the way was a beautiful black panther. A thick leather collar hung with small bells was fastened round its neck. The animal was tethered to the faqir's arm by a stout thong; and as it lay extended at full length, its nose upon its paws, it blinked sleepily in the sunlight, taking no notice whatever of the passing traffic. Opium was probably the taming medium, but the crowd ascribed the quietude of the beast to the supernatural power of the ascetic. Again Yasin threw out a handful of coins. It had no effect on the old man and the money remained scattered in the street.

"In the name of the Prophet, let us pass, holy father!" cried Yasin, riding close up to the drugged old man and casting down another donation—this time they were larger pieces of money, including half, quarter, and whole rupees.

As the coins fell with a silver chink round him, the faqir lifted his head. The panther rose slowly to its

fect and looked at the elephant that was snorting uneasily as it caught the scent in the warm breeze.

"In the name of the Prophet, give us your blessing, servant of Allah, and let us pass," cried Yasin again.

This time there was a response to his appeal. The faqir got up, and his familiar, at a touch on the leather lead, moved nearer to its master. It yawned and stretched itself with a cat-like movement, twitching its glossy black fur along the spine. The strange couple still barred the way.

"In the name of the Prophet! go back!" cried the faqir.

He lifted a long lean arm and bony hand towards Hassan and addressed his words to him directly. Yasin was ignored.

"Why should I go back, father?" asked Hassan, as he leaned over the side of the howdah.

"Darkness and light! they never meet; they never unite! Son! your errand is a foolish one. Who seeks darkness instead of light? Only the doers of evil. Beware of darkness lest it devour the light. Go back to your father's house!"

Hassan flung down a couple of English sovereigns. They lay at the old man's feet unnoticed in the dust and glittered in the Indian sunlight.

"My errand is to claim a husband's right. Let me pass in the name of Allah and His Prophet, father," he said.

Yasin pressed his horse close to the elephant.

"Brother, it would be wise to turn back; you will not find what you are seeking."

"I shall go on and carry out my design. You can turn back if you like. You are not obliged to go any further than you choose."

"I choose to remain with you, brother," replied Yasin, in spite of his fear of the faqir.

"Then get off your horse and make a salaam to the holy man. Pick up the gold I have thrown down and place it in his bowl. I would do it myself, but there is

no room with all this crowd round us for the elephant to kneel."

By this time a large number of people had collected and the traffic was stopped. Men belonging to the bodyguards of numerous Hyderabad nobles pressed forward in the hope of seeing a street fight, a sanguinary scene wherein each man of the crowd carried lethal weapons enough to arm five more of his fellows. The word went round that it was not a fight but the faqir of the black panther, noted for his wonderful gift of prophecy. Instantly there was a general falling back and each man inquired of his neighbour the name of the individual whom the holy man was cursing. Not a soul ventured to touch the money lying in the road, and the greatest care was observed not to press upon the faqir and his familiar. His cursing power was said to be abnormally strong, even for a man of his calling.

Yasin plucked up courage to do as Hassan asked. He dismounted, gathered up the money and dropped it in the begging bowl. Once more he begged for leave to proceed.

"Pass on! pass on! if that is your will!" cried the faqir. "In the name of the Prophet pass on! But you go to meet misfortune and darkness. Only after much trouble shall there be light!"

He stepped aside, and the panther, with a drowsy snarl at its enemy the elephant, followed like a dog at his heels. Yasin mounted his horse and the party proceeded on its way; every man in the company salaamed to the ascetic as he passed. The elephant's large feet fell softly, and the golden sunlit dust rose in clouds beneath them. The idlers of the street whose curiosity had been roused followed alongside to see where this young prince was going so rashly in the face of the holy man's advice. At the next turning their attention was diverted down another street by the sound of screams and shouts and the sight of a struggling mass of men and women. A bevy of nautch girls, gaily dressed in scarlet and purple, and decked

with flowers and jewels, were being forcibly abducted by a rival wedding party that required their services, and would take no excuse of previous engagement elsewhere. Hassan proceeded on his way; his mind was full of the anticipated interview, and was quite undisturbed by the obstruction of the faqir, whom he regarded by the light of Western teaching as a harmless lunatic and beggar. His brother, on the other hand, uninfluenced by modern thought, was full of vague apprehension. He was gradually coming to the belief that there were stronger influences at work than the human will; and that a higher power than individual desire was ruling their destinies. Was it right to combat this power, and oppose their wills to the will of Allah? This manufacturer of omens, good and bad, inherited his full share of superstition from his mother, and quaked before the real thing when it crossed his path.

CHAPTER XXV

THEY arrived before the palace belonging to Nissa's family. It was a large block of buildings with small windows mostly shuttered with venetians. An irregular balcony or a patch of verandah here and there broke up the lines of the inhospitable looking walls. Bamboo blinds hung down between the low pillars that supported the terraced roofs of the verandahs. From various holes in the walls dark stains showed the primitive drainage that was still employed for getting rid of the bath water. Here and there were bits of carved wood, black with age ; but like the rest of the buildings in Hyderabad, dignity and nobility of architecture were wanting in lines and proportions.

The party halted at the principal entrance that opened into a low broad verandah. From behind its high balustrade a dozen or more armed men sprang up. They filled the space at the top of the flight of steps leading up to the heavy iron-studded door. Servants poured from the house and ran down into the street. At a signal from the mahout the elephant knelt and Hassan stepped down from the howdah. Yasin also dismounted, leaving his horse to be held by one of his troopers.

The two brothers walked slowly side by side up the steps ; servants followed ; and the guard in the verandah formed into line. At the entrance stood an elderly Muhammadan magnificently dressed, attended by a number of family dependents. It was Nissa's uncle, a half brother of her father and very like him in appearance.

The house was more spacious than its outward appearance indicated. They passed from hall to hall, and arrived at a room that was handsomely furnished with gilded chairs upholstered in crimson velvet. A subdued light entered from a verandah and the atmosphere was close. At the end of the room stood the usual dais to be seen in most durbar halls. It had five armed chairs elaborately carved and gilded, arranged in a semicircle.

The courtly old Muhammadan noble led the way and they were asked to seat themselves. A good many of his retainers followed and ranged themselves in the hall ; some of the armed men formed a guard near the entrance, lining up again in military order.

Then followed the conventional conversation, consisting of compliments and polite inquiries, which is indispensable to visits of state. Hassan, who was burning to put the vital question as to whether he would be allowed to see his wife, found it difficult to be patient. Yasin, on the contrary, enjoyed every minute of it, and was never at a loss for flowery speech and compliment. At length an opportunity occurred and Hassan preferred his request. It was a pleasant surprise to be told that notification had been given of his intended visit ; and the ladies of the hareem had made no objection to his coming.

Again there was a ceremonious uprising and leading of the way. Yasin followed, but the rest of the company were told to remain in the hall. Neither of the brothers were strangers to the interior of city palaces. The Nawab owned one of the largest not far from the house they were now in. Soon after leaving the durbar hall they were met by two or three menservants of the hareem, tall heavy watchdogs with very little intelligence but plenty of low cunning to assist them in fulfilling their responsibilities. They conducted the visitors and their host along dark passages and up uncarpeted stairs, through screened galleries and empty anterooms until they arrived at a small chamber looking out upon the

street. The tiny windows near the ceiling in their deep embrasures could not throw much light within; the room was innocent of curtains or drapery of any kind except the heavy purdah that hung in the doorway. No women were visible. They were not far off, but on the approach of the strangers they had veiled themselves and taken cover in dark corners where they could not be seen. The menservants retired and they were alone. The old Muhammadan clapped his hands. A veiled figure entered and came into the middle of the room, led by a second who retreated immediately and disappeared behind the purdah. Hassan started forward with an exclamation of pleasure.

"Nissa! Is it you, my wife? Speak! tell me that you have not left my father's house in anger. Tell me that you went of your own free will!" There was no reply, and he continued with increasing emotion, "I have come to ask you to return and stay with us till I leave next week to join my friend."

The presence of Nissa's relative was a restraint upon his speech. He could not say more, not knowing how much she herself had revealed of their relationship. Her family might still be in ignorance of his rejection of her. Yasin understood the situation and said:

"I think I had better go, brother. I will wait for you in the next room. Nissa will find it easier to speak if she has no one listening."

He was as anxious as Hassan for the union of the husband and wife. It was the only safeguard of his own interests. Until they were united his own prospects were insecure and uncertain.

"Yes, if you wouldn't mind; I should be glad to be left for a few minutes. It will make it easier for us both."

"I will come with you," said their host, and the two disappeared.

"At last! at last!" cried Hassan. "At last I have you to myself! Nissa! my beloved! my wife! unveil! we are alone!"

He advanced towards her to take her in his arms. The large enveloping cloak of thin China silk was thrown aside and Hassan beheld—not his wife, but his mother-in-law. In figure and features she was like her daughter, and there was the same gentleness of expression; but the curved lips lacked the sensitive intellectuality of the daughter. Long years of repression under the Nani's rule had crushed the spirit and given the mouth a sullen droop.

Hassan fell back a step or two in blank surprise, and an exclamation of dismay escaped his lips as he stared at the strange face.

"Son-in-law! you are welcome to Nissa's home. We should have been pleased if you had come yesterday with your wife," she said in an even voice in which was no life or animation.

Her speech took Hassan aback, as it practically reproached him for a want of courtesy. It would have been a gracious act on his part if he had come with his wife. For a moment he was at a loss how to reply. He could not admit that Nissa was sent to her mother without his knowledge. Such an admission might give rise to further questionings; and the answers could only give offence. He pleaded pressing business; his work for His Highness kept him employed all day.

How was it that he could come to-day? she asked, and he replied that His Highness was otherwise engaged and his services were not required.

"May I see Nissa?" he asked.

"It is not usual for a husband to follow his wife to her father's house so soon after her arrival on her first visit," she replied in the same level tone that betokened nothing. "It is six weeks since the wedding. Surely she can be spared to us for a few days."

The argument was feeble, but Hassan was determined to keep his temper and preserve an outward calm whatever he might feel within himself.

"I want to speak to her, Bibi; to ask a question or two," he replied gently. "She shall stay with you while

I am away ; I do not start, I find, for five days. Will you be so good as to ask her to come here for a few minutes ?" Then as she did not move or show any sign of calling her daughter, he continued : " I have seen my father this morning and have something to tell Nissa from him."

His mother-in-law was silent. She had received her instructions, and like a machine she was prepared to carry them out ; but he was not acting as they said he would act. It was anticipated that on discovering the deceit practised upon him he would be extremely angry ; he would storm and rage and demand to see his wife immediately, refusing to go away until his demand was satisfied. The hareem servants were then to be summoned and he was to be ejected by force.

Instead of losing his self-control he was perfectly quiet, and his stillness gave her a growing sense of his strength. She drew up her veil, placing it over her hair without covering her face, and with a frightened glance at the masterful face she turned to leave the room. Hassan stepped quickly to her side and laid a firm but gentle hand upon her arm.

" Mother ! " he said, and his voice struck a note of kindness that she had not heard addressed to herself for many a long year. It touched her dulled heart and awoke feelings that had been paralyzed by repression. " Mother ! I want my wife ! "

" She is not here," she stammered, blurting out a truth which it was intended by the family should be repressed.

" Her father told me only this morning that she was here," he said, disbelieving her statement. " Send for her, mother, and let me speak one word, only one little sentence ! "

She began to cry quietly, as though she feared reproach for showing her emotion.

" I can't send for her ; she has gone."

" When did she leave ? " he asked in a voice that was

little more than a whisper ; for he did not forget that the hareem has ears in every direction.

"Two hours ago," she replied still lower in tone.

"And where has she gone?"

"I don't know. They did not tell me," she said between the sobs she tried in vain to stifle.

Again she gave him a frightened glance. The information that Nissa had been removed should by all precedent have brought on the storm that she was told to look for.

"Did she go away happy?" he asked in the same gentle voice that conveyed nothing but kindness towards a weak woman who needed care and protection.

"I believe so."

"Alone?" he asked with a flash of hope that perhaps she had returned to his father's house.

"No; the Nani, my husband's mother, went with her."

"She was taken to one of your country houses, I suppose. Which?"

"I don't know," was again the reply. Then as Hassan did not speak nor make any movement to go, she suddenly cast aside the shell of reserve and burst out into a torrent of bitter complaint. "The Nani tells me nothing. She says I am too foolish and silly to know anything; but it is not so!" cried the unhappy lady.

She lifted eyes to his that were the eyes of the child Nissa, and the appeal went straight to his heart, opening the fount of his pity.

"Poor little mother!" he said tenderly.

His words only served to fling wider the flood-gates. No one ever spoke to her in that manner in the hareem. It encouraged her to pour out a long string of bitter complaint and relate her grievances in detail. Injustice as well as repression had been her lot from the time she was brought as a bride to the house. The memory rankled in her mind and gave rise to a deep-seated indignation, the fire of which could never now be

quenched. At the Nani's death she would take her place ; and as it had been meted out to her, so she would in course of time give measure for measure when young lives came under her influence. Love, pity, the milk of human kindness, all had been done to death by the cruel tyranny of the old over the young.

How many women in that great Muhammadan city, rich and of gentle birth, thought Hassan, had had their lives similarly crushed, their generous impulses ruthlessly killed, their humanity destroyed in just the same way ? When would the older generation understand that the younger was not to be driven down a dull colourless path like the dumb beast of burden ; that it must not have its finer instincts stifled and its individuality completely annihilated ?

He was in no humour to enter into the troubles of another ; but he had not the heart to stop her. She ceased at last, choked by sobs of grief and self-pity. He took her hand.

"Don't cry, little mother ! We are in Allah's keeping, and what He wills must come to pass. Nissa is quite safe with the Nani, no doubt ; and when she returns to me at my father's house you must pay us a visit. She will show you all her treasures and you will be very happy."

He pressed the limp nerveless hand and left the room. Yasin heard his footstep and joined him with his companion. The menservants reappeared and conducted them to the door of the hareem. Hassan was silent. He was considering his next move. There were a few questions he wished to put to his host before he started on his homeward journey, and he was wondering whether he could get a straightforward answer from him.

"Did Nissa promise to return at once ?" asked Yasin as soon as the door was shut behind them and the attendants out of hearing.

"It was not Nissa but her mother," replied Hassan quietly.

The old Muhammadan watched him closely from beneath his thick eyebrows. He was aware of his niece's departure, and of the decision of the family to keep it a secret. He, too, had anticipated a violent outburst of temper when Hassan was told that Nissa would not see him.

"Where is she, then?" asked Yasin in surprise.

"That is what I want to know of the Shahzada, here. Can you tell me, sir?" he said.

"I am sorry I am unable to do so. I am in greater ignorance of her movements than her own mother. Between them they have arranged something and it is no business of mine to ask any questions since the Nani herself has gone with her. I am sorry you are disappointed," he added politely; and again he glanced at Hassan in his European dress and turban with curiosity. The Western veneer went deeper than the garments, was his inward comment. "You need have no fear for Nissa's happiness. She is much beloved in the family, and is a favourite with the Nani. She will return safely to your father's house when you come back from your holiday."

All through the interview mention of Nissa's infirmity was carefully avoided; she was spoken of as a happy and honoured bride whose happiness and welfare were her husband's chief thought. They passed on to the Durbar hall which was again filled with members of the household. A little more conversation took place on the dais, and Hassan was permitted to take his leave. His host accompanied him to the entrance, round about which stood the men-at-arms.

The issue of the visit was very different from what might have been expected fifty years earlier. As they descended the steps Hassan noted the number of retainers gathered in the verandah and also in the road outside. They were armed with a strange assortment of weapons. All carried daggers of various size and shape, mostly of Eastern make. Some wore swords and tulwars; others were armed with matchlocks and rifles.

The mercenaries, like his own men, were of mixed Indian nationality. As long as their employers remained on friendly terms, the attitude of the men was friendly to each other. They gossiped with the visitors, or sat like patient dogs, idly watching for the signal to attack, taking stock of the arms displayed, mentally comparing them with their own.

At a given signal from either master the peace of the moment would have been shattered. Quick hands would have flown to arms; swords and daggers would have flashed in the sun and wild shots rung out. The street would have resounded with shouts of execrations; and though lives might not necessarily have been lost, blood would have flowed freely before the riot was ended and the visitor safely delivered from the men who were rough-handling him.

The old Muhammadan had seen and taken part in many such skirmishes that had arisen over a less important question than the demand of a man to be allowed to see his wife. It was with a curious mixture of relief and disappointment that he shook hands with Hassan and returned Yasin's salutation. His retainers shared his sentiments to a certain extent. Hassan's bodyguard possessed some valuable weapons which would have made acceptable loot. However, perhaps it was as well, thought the noble, that peace should prevail. In these later days deeds of violence could not be done with impunity. Sir Salar Jung, the old Prime Minister—might his soul rest in peace!—had instituted a new reign of law and order, which the present ruler with his ministers upheld. An encounter between the mercenaries of nobles now-a-days involved a police inquiry, and possibly a prosecution for a breach of the peace, with compensation for broken heads.

The elephant threaded its way back through the crowded streets with Hassan in the glittering howdah. He was deep in thought. He knew the ways of the East. If he pursued his quest openly and again

demanding an interview with his wife, it would be suavely acceded to by word of mouth, and by any number of letters couched in the politest of language. Then history would repeat itself, and he would be met with disappointment on all sides. He had neither time nor inclination to go on a number of fool's errands like the two last ; and he decided upon a change of tactics. He was convinced that his own father was at the bottom of it all. There could be no other influence at work but his ; for Nissa's family could have no reason for keeping husband and wife apart. It was more politic to please the Nawab than to play into the hands of his son ; and as long as he wished the couple to be separated, so long would Hassan be foiled in his endeavours to find Nissa. It was to his father he must turn. He must oppose that iron will with a will of steel. The trial of strength would come later when he returned from his expedition. Until then he would bide his time and vex himself with no more fruitless searches.

The sunlit dusty thoroughfare was forgotten. His ears were deaf to the clatter of his own escort and the constant ringing of the bell at the elephant's neck, and to the noises of the streets. Suddenly his attention was brought back to the scene by a halt called by Yasin. The faqir of the black panther stood by the side of the elephant.

"Darkness and light ! Night and day ! Did ever they mingle ? At the approach of darkness where is light ? Together they cannot be found ! Allah is great and Muhammad is His Prophet. Allah brings light to those who are in darkness if they wait upon His will. Proceed, Excellency. You will see the light when you least expect it. Darkness and light ! can they ever wed ?"

The elephant moved on with Hassan, and the troopers formed up again. The words of the old man pursued them as they were repeated over and over again in a high penetrating voice that rose above the

roar of the street. Long after they were out of hearing the sentences continued to ring in Hassan's ears. Darkness and light ! Himself and Nissa ! Would they ever meet ? Only if Allah willed !

He must be patient and wait.

CHAPTER XXVI

HASSAN'S leave was extended to nearly three months to his great satisfaction ; it happened fortunately for him that the Nizam had occasion to go to Calcutta after Christmas, and did not intend to return to Hyderabad till the middle of March. Hassan was informed that he must present himself at the palace a few days before His Highness came back. He would have been still more pleased if he had been asked to join his prince on the hills at the end of the month.

He hurried to his mother's room on the evening of his arrival home. As he greeted her his eye wandered round in search of another figure ; but the Begum was alone except for her life-long companion, the Shahzada's second wife, and the women attached to the hareem, who discreetly disappeared as he entered.

Fazeela hovered about the room, not listening to the conversation in detail but with ears sufficiently alert to catch the subject. She cared little that Rivenhall had killed five tigers, one a dangerous man-eater, another a destroyer of much cattle ; that Hassan himself had followed up a wounded tiger and shot the brute over a beater ; and nothing that the Englishman and his Muhammadan friend had never tired of each other's company or found the time dull. As she glanced at Hassan now and then she nodded her head. The exercise and life in the open air under canvas had had its effect. He looked in much better health than when he started ; older perhaps ; decidedly stronger and more robust. It was well, she said to herself. He would be in a better humour now for marriage and more willing to fall in with his father's wishes.

It was not until he rose to leave his mother that he inquired if Nissa was well and whether she had returned.

"She is very well ; better than when she was with us. The change has done her a great deal of good," replied the Begum at once.

"Is she here in the house?"

"Not yet ; she will be coming later on."

"They have treated her well, I hope?" he said quickly with a keen glance at his mother.

"She has been honoured as the eldest daughter of the house ; and she has been and still is very happy," said his mother in a tone that should have been convincing.

"Happy!" he echoed.

"Certainly ; why not? She is a good girl and has become reconciled to the will of God."

A moody silence followed this information. Fazeela watched him with the shadow of a smile upon her lips.

"Is Mrs. Barstow still with her?" he asked presently.

"The English lady has been with Nissa ever since her holiday ended. I don't know what she would do without her. Mrs. Barstow continues to read to Nissa, and to teach her many things. She goes to her house every day—they send a carriage for her—and she is giving Nissa's little sister lessons. My daughter-in-law is a lucky girl to have someone like Mrs. Barstow always at her side. The days pass like hours and the hours like minutes."

He listened to her slow deliberate speech, turning over many questions in his mind.

"Don't you want Nissa back?" he asked.

The Begum's eyes brightened as she glanced up at him.

"I am counting the days to her return," she replied with more animation than he had seen before.

"When do you think that will be?"

"It rests with you and your father——"

"Me and my father!" he interrupted hastily. "As for me, I shall be glad to see Nissa to-morrow. Let her come at once."

"You must talk it over with the Shahzada before we make any plans. He has something to say."

"So have I," replied Hassan with a quiet determination that brought a shadow of anxiety across his mother's face. "How has my father's health been during my absence?"

"When you first left us he was ill, very ill with grief. The fact that you were unwilling to do as he wished preyed on his mind. A fortnight later he began to get better; at the same time he seemed happier. Since then he has continued to improve, and you will find him decidedly stronger."

"I am glad to hear your good news. It seems that the whole house is in better spirits and health. You look brighter, yourself, mother. As for Yasin, he has quite recovered his spirits, and I think"—he smiled as he glanced at Fazeela—"even the little mother has grown stouter."

It was a compliment from Fazeela's point of view, and she showed her appreciation by smiling broadly in return.

"I have reason to be happier," she said. "The evil omens have ceased, and there have been several that speak of good luck. As soon as the bad omens stopped, the Shahzada began to mend, and Yasin lost his ill temper. I went to a wise woman, and she said it was the work of a Jinn. She decoyed the Jinn away by bribing him with a large pot of money. We filled a jar with small oranges and stones and put a layer of silver on the top. He thinks the pot is full of money, and he will stay by it until King Solomon releases him."

Hassan could not restrain his laughter at this tale told so solemnly.

"You may laugh, but I tell you it is true. You ask Yasin! He helped us."

"Where have you planted the pot?" Hassan inquired, composing his face to a suitable expression of gravity.

"Near the cemetery. The wise woman will look after it and see that it is not touched. She says we are on no account to open it. The Jinn is inside sitting on the silver. If he gets out it will be difficult for her to persuade him to go in again, and then he may come back and all the trouble will begin again."

"All right, little mother, I won't meddle with your pot. Your wise woman is a very wise woman, I can see that!"

"Of course she is, or I should not have employed her."

He departed, smiling still, but before he reached his room he had forgotten Fazeela's wise woman and the Jinn, and was thinking of the coming trial of strength between himself and his father. A battle royal it promised to be between the two men; and unless Nissa failed him it must be fought out to the bitter end. Of that fact he was convinced.

He was summoned to his father's presence early the next morning before the usual hour for the daily visit. He had no sooner seated himself than the Nawab reopened the campaign by saying:

"Son, you must marry." He spoke abruptly and in a tone of command that was final.

Hassan received the announcement in silence. He was very unwilling to go over the old arguments and objections afresh. The Nawab looked at him from beneath his thick eyebrows; he was measuring the strength of the young lion.

"You must marry," he repeated with more force and a raising of the voice, as though the words were put as a question as well as an order.

"Can't we let it alone for the present, Excellency?" said Hassan quietly.

"No, we can't!" snapped the Nawab with impatience. "The preliminaries have been concluded. It only remains to perform the actual nikah contract in the

presence of witnesses, and the lady we have chosen will be brought to you. There is just a week before His Highness returns, which gives you more time to yourself than you will have after he comes back."

"I hold to what I said before I left you, sir. I will not consent to marry any woman until I have Nissa's consent. I must have more than a verbal message. I must be convinced that she refuses of her own free will to live with me."

"Very well, let it be so," said the Nawab with more moderation than might have been expected in the face of Hassan's obstinacy. Certainly, thought Hassan, the old gentleman is better in health and less irritable. The Nawab continued: "I warn you, however, that no son of a blind woman shall succeed me. If you choose to take any woman to wife who is maimed or imperfect in any way——"

The Nawab leaned forward. There was a grim smile on his lips and a curious light in his eye.

"Yes, Excellency; continue," said Hassan, smiling back, strangely like his father in appearance and expression.

"... the child of that woman shall die! Allah will send means of removing it."

"I understand," replied his son after a slight pause. "It is as well to be warned in good time. On hearing from Nissa by a personal interview, or by some reliable woman whom I can trust, that she will not return to me, and that it is her express wish that I should marry again—I will fall in with your desires."

"I am content," said his father with grim satisfaction. "Your wife will occupy the room prepared for Nissa."

"Again I must make the condition; if Nissa consents."

"And the wedding will take place in three days' time."

"If I am satisfied that my wife wills it."

"Your bride will be brought to your mother's chamber and the ceremony will take place there."

Both men kept their tempers outwardly, but inwardly

Hassan at least was raging. He dared not give way one iota, lest he should be tempted to speak disrespectfully. Veneration for parents is an article of faith with the followers of the Prophet. It was a relief when the Shahzada turned the conversation as abruptly as he had begun it.

"Tell me about your shooting trip," he said. "I have been after tigers on that very ground you and your friend were shooting over. We used nets and spears."

The conversation flowed into quieter channels, and the rest of Hassan's visit passed as peacefully as though no difference existed between the two men.

It was a relief to find that his presence was not required at any party or festivity. It enabled Hassan to forget the disagreeable prospect in store for him. If he thought of it at all, he comforted himself with the assurance that Nissa would readily come to him at his bidding. As he was longing for a sight of her, so she must be longing to hear his voice. He could not doubt it. How often he had watched the delicate ear turned towards him, deaf to all other sound but his speech. She hung on his lightest word with parted lips, in anxiety lest she should lose even a sigh or the shadow of a laugh.

That very day Hassan went to call on Derwent. He was shown into the drawing-room where he found Mrs. Derwent. She rose from her chair and, taking up a walking stick that was in readiness close by, came a step or two towards him, holding out her hand in welcome. She walked with a slight limp. It was scarcely perceptible and was more of the nature of a stiffness than a real limp. Hassan glanced down at her feet in surprise, and caught sight of two dainty shoes.

"How are you, Captain Hassan?" she cried in warm welcome. "I have been looking forward so much to meeting you again. I heard of you from Lord Rivenhall; he has been staying with us for a day or two. He told us what a splendid time you both had."

As she talked she settled herself down in the easy-chair from which she had risen when he appeared. Again he had an opportunity of seeing the dainty shoes and again he wondered. He replied to her greeting and expressed his pleasure at meeting her once more. As she spoke he watched the curved lips, the straight nose, the oval face. Yes; she was curiously like Nissa, the Nissa of the present as well as the past in every respect except the eyes. Even in her movements and little unconscious tricks of posing there was a resemblance.

"My accident was a terrible affair," she said with a pucker of pain across the brow; "but I have made a splendid recovery."

"I heard that you lost your foot," he remarked, wondering if it was the correct thing to say, and whether he ought to express his regret.

"It had to be amputated. I have been fitted with an artificial foot. I shall get used to it in time. At present it feels awkward and I am not allowed to use it much. The doctors tell me that by-and-by I shall not know that it is artificial."

"You will never dare to ride in a motor-car again," he observed.

"Indeed, you are wrong! I go out driving frequently. At first, I admit, I was terrified; but I conquered my terror; and now I don't know what I should do without the motor. I have been riding lately every morning, which is a great pleasure. My husband"—how proudly she used the term—"is so good to me, so kind and thoughtful."

He glanced round the room. It was full of light, and the sweet scent of flowers. Inviting chairs were grouped sociably about; small tables held the latest books and magazines suggesting pleasant hours of leisure, companionship and amusement. An open piano, an untidy workbasket with coloured silks, thimble and scissors, a small writing table on which lay some letters ready for post, these and many other trifles spoke of

the refined employments dear to the heart of the Englishwoman. He contrasted Dell's room with the Begum's, which bore no sign of occupation other than was indicated by the huqa, the dish of sweets and the luxurious cushions

"You lead a very busy life, I understand," said Dell, noting that there were fresh lines on his face and that the characteristic reserve had increased rather than diminished.

"When His Highness is in Hyderabad I have plenty to do," he replied a little stiffly.

"You like your work?"

"Very much."

She wished he would speak more freely of himself and of the subjects in which he was interested.

"You are married?" she asked at length, unable to resist the promptings of curiosity.

"Yes," he replied, avoiding her eye.

"I hope you are happy."

Somehow she was just a little disappointed. She was full of her own happiness and looked for a reflection of the same bliss in him. He was the hero of her one moment of romance, and she would have liked to believe that they had both in their different spheres found that which they could not hope to share together. Then she recalled what he had told her about their Muhammadan marriages; how they did not choose for themselves like the English, and knew nothing of their wives until they were married. As he did not reply, she changed the subject and began to speak of their mutual friends. Instantly his manner changed, and he became more at ease.

"My sister and her husband are well. You heard that they went off to Burmah soon after they landed?" she said.

"Yes; Derwent told me. Have you had any news of Miss Broadfield?"

"She is engaged to be married to Captain Bonchester. The wedding is to take place next autumn. She is

going to the hills for the hot weather, and I shall see her next month."

They talked on for a time, and Hassan stayed to tea. Derwent came in and the Muhammadan watched his friend as he waited on Dell, not allowing any one else to assist. He could not help contrasting Derwent with himself. Never once had he offered any assistance to his own helpless wife, and she needed it far more than Mrs. Derwent. The thought sent the hot blood once more through his veins. It had not been that he was unwilling; he was ashamed to remember that it had never once occurred to him to offer. Until his fault was expiated he would have no peace of mind.

Dell knew Mrs. Barstow and had seen her occasionally; but she learned nothing from her of Nissa's blindness. When questioned Mrs. Barstow had praised her pupil's beauty and sweetness of disposition. She said in perfect truth that she knew nothing of the inner life of the hareem. She might have suspected that all was not quite as it should be between the young husband and wife; but she kept her suspicions to herself.

"I am so glad that you like Mrs. Barstow," said Dell presently, interrupting her husband in a sporting reminiscence which he was relating as a set-off to Hassan's story of the death of the man-eater. "I found her for you and so I have felt rather responsible."

"She has been everything we could desire," responded Hassan warmly. "My wife is very much attached to her, and I hope she will stay on with us for some time to come."

"Have you seen her since you returned?"

"No; you are the first I have called upon. I am going to the bungalow on my way back."

He rose to say good-bye.

"I hope that you will let me come and see your wife some day soon," said Dell as she shook hands.

"Thank you; I will tell her of your kind proposal," he replied.

Dell was suddenly aware that the old reserve had

returned ; the barrier to intimacy and geniality was up again, and she was beating against the blank walls of a hidden life that jealously excluded herself.

“How strange it is!” she said with a puzzled expression when Derwent returned to the room after seeing Hassan into his car. “Captain Hassan is as friendly as he can be when he enters our lives ; but as soon as we reverse matters and try to enter his life, the friendliness disappears ; a curtain, an invisible wall, comes between us——”

“The purdah !” said Derwent quickly. “We have taken India and invested it, but the purdah remains unconquered. We shall never get behind the purdah of the East.”

CHAPTER XXVII

HASSAN found Mrs. Barstow in the sitting-room of the little bungalow which she still occupied. She gave him a warm welcome.

"We are so glad to hear of your safe return," she said in English. "Nissa asked me to tell you that she had remembered you every day in her prayers. God has been good in sending you back to us without accident."

He thanked her as he held her hand.

"Some day I must tell you, you and Nissa, of my adventures. I can assure you that they were very exciting at times."

"Sit down, Captain Hassan ; I have time for a little chat before I go back to the palace for the evening."

The sun had set with a glorious display of colour, leaving behind a golden twilight glow. The roosting sparrows cheeped in the verandah as they quarrelled over the most comfortable places on the beams. A lamp was already lighted, but its flame only half illuminated the drawing-room.

"I am glad you have a few minutes to spare. I want to ask you to befriend me in a certain matter, if you will be so kind. May I have your help ?"

"Certainly ; but, perhaps, I ought to know what it is before I make any rash promise."

"First, I want to know why you went away so suddenly for your holiday ? I am right in saying that it was a sudden departure, am I not ?"

"Yes ; I think it must have been at a couple of hours' notice. The Nawab had already given me leave to go,

and I was to start for Madras two days before the public holidays began. On the afternoon of the day I left, which was at least a week sooner than the one originally fixed, he sent me a handsome cheque, more than doubling the small amount that was due ; and he asked if I could make it convenient to leave that very evening. Of course I had no objection. One always understands in taking employment in a family like yours, that wishes are to be complied with without question. In fact there is no other alternative."

"You did right," said Hassan. "Did you see Nissa before you left?"

"Yes ; there was no attempt to part us, if that is what you mean."

"Was she happy ? Did she seem troubled in any way about going ?"

"Not in the least ; on the contrary, she was in as good spirits as I had ever seen her."

"You know that she was sent back to her father's house directly after you left."

"I understood that she was going on a visit during your absence. On your return she was to come back to your mother."

Her eyes were fixed on him with inquiry, and he felt that he must make a clean breast of it if she was to be of any real help. He told her the whole story of his marriage, and was astonished to find that it was a relief to pour out his trouble into sympathetic ears. He described the scene in Nissa's room on the night of the wedding.

"Poor child ! poor child !" was Mrs. Barstow's comment when she had heard him to the end.

Again he was struck with the different view taken by the Englishwoman of the case. All her pity was roused on Nissa's behalf. It was she who must have suffered most, and was therefore most to be pitied, according to Mrs. Barstow. His own distress and disappointment, if considered at all, occupied a minor place in her thought. He did not resent this, however ; but again

it put "a ball of fire in his heart," as he remembered how little he himself had pitied his wife, and how completely he had withheld his sympathy and his help in her hour of need.

"After seeing Nissa constantly in my mother's room," he continued, "I lost that feeling of horror. Gradually love came back and drove out every other sentiment. I thought of my friend Derwent. When his wife met with her accident, he did not turn from her and reject her ; he only clung to her the more closely."

"We look at these matters in a different light in the West," said Mrs. Barstow softly.

"I told my parents plainly that I regretted my conduct, and that I wished Nissa to live with me as my wife. My mother would have consented ; but my father was bitterly opposed to it. He would listen to nothing I could urge, and was ready to curse me for desiring to make a blind woman the mother of my children. He proposed a second marriage ; I would not consent. Then I left for my holiday, which was prolonged, as you know, to nearly three months. I came back determined to carry through my resolution about Nissa ; but I meet with the same opposition. If anything it is stronger than before. Not only is it stronger, but my parents have already made arrangements for my second marriage. They have chosen Huleema Bee, the daughter of a family in Hyderabad."

"I have heard something about Huleema Bee, and that she was likely to enter the family of the Nawab," said Mrs. Barstow as he ceased speaking.

"Who told you ?" he asked.

"Nissa herself mentioned it."

"Then she knows of my father's intentions. Originally it was settled that Huleema Bee should be asked for on my brother's behalf. The boy was very anxious to be married and it was a most suitable match. I am afraid I don't bring happiness to others," said Hassan ruefully.

"How can I help you?" asked Mrs. Barstow,

watching her visitor with a woman's pity. There was something about him that was very attractive ; and she was sorry that his people opposed him in his desire to take what was obviously a right and noble course.

"My father has asked me to marry Huleema Bee without further delay," he continued. "Such a request from a father in this country amounts to a command. I have consented ; but I have imposed conditions. I must first be assured that Nissa refuses to return as my wife. Secondly, that she consents to my second marriage. I have been so cruelly deceived by her family that I can never trust their word again. I want you to see Nissa alone and privately ; and hear from her own lips the answer to my two questions. You must bring her reply to me yourself."

"I will do as you wish and promise faithfully that I will tell you the truth."

"Does she love me ?" he asked with a longing in his voice he could not hide.

"I am sure she does," she replied without any hesitation. "You are her prince, her sun, to use her own words. She is never tired of telling me how great her love is for you ; and I am sure that she means every word she says. I feel no doubt about the truth of it."

It was like bringing food to a starving man. He hung upon her words, and could have listened as long as her breath lasted. She saw the hunger of his soul, and her pity was roused to its fullest extent.

"Tell her that my love is greater than hers ; that it has conquered all prejudice ; that my life's happiness hangs on her decision."

"I will ! indeed, I will ! and I trust that the answer will bring you joy," responded Mrs. Barstow with warmth.

"How much did you know of my story ?" he asked presently.

"Not all ; not quite all. I guessed that matters were not as they should have been between you ; but I could not understand why the estrangement had

occurred. I did not know that you saw your bride for the first time when you entered her room on the night of your wedding. It is a cruel custom, unfair to both husband and wife."

"No child of mine shall ever be bound to a partner for life without seeing with his or her own eyes what that partner is like," he cried with bitterness. "For all Nissa knew I might have been deaf and dumb."

He was silent, and Mrs. Barstow, feeling that she had no comfort to bring to the wounded spirit, did not break the silence.

"How soon can you bring me my answer? I want it immediately as my father is hurrying on the second marriage."

"Will this time to-morrow do?"

"It must do if you can't manage it sooner; but it gives me very little time. The wedding is to be the day after to-morrow."

Again there was a pause. Hassan was thinking of Nissa, and Mrs. Barstow was wondering how he would overcome the difficulties that beset his path.

"If Nissa's reply is—what you hope it will be, may I know what you intend to do since it concerns me indirectly?" said Mrs. Barstow.

"I must have your help; we shall both want it. You will not refuse it, will you?" he asked, searching her face with a sudden anxiety; for if she failed him he had no other reliable resource.

"No; I will stand by Nissa," she said slowly, as though weighing her promise. "I will help you both as far as it is in my power. What are you going to do?"

"Carry my wife straight back to England. She must leave Hyderabad at once. It would not be safe for her to remain. She might be taken into the city; in which case I should never find her again. Or—she—might—die. No enquiries can be properly made into the cause of deaths behind the purdah. If they are made at all they are useless formalities. The gosha of the hareems of the Deccan is impenetrable, inviolable.

Nissa must be ready at a moment's notice to step into my car and be driven by the shortest and quickest route across the border into British territory. Even there we mustn't linger. I shall not feel that she is safe until she sets foot on the steamer at Bombay."

"You want me to go with her?"

"I do; she can't go alone; and I have no one else on whom I can depend."

"Couldn't Mr. Derwent help you?"

"He is the last person to be involved in this affair. His position as Assistant Resident would not allow of it, even if he knew the facts and were willing to help. You have no responsibilities towards the British Government, nor the Nizam's, and you are free to act as you choose. Will you help me?" he asked again.

"I will with pleasure—if it is necessary."

"I tell you that it will be necessary. Nissa will come to me gladly! willingly!"

He spoke with a confidence that his listener did not share. Mrs. Barstow was beginning to think that whatever Nissa's decision might be, trouble was likely to follow. She had learned that the hareem was a mysterious world, of which she knew next to nothing. There were wheels within wheels. The atmosphere was charged with intrigue and deceit, and no one could be trusted to speak the truth or keep faith. Tongues were used to hide the truth; not proclaim it. She sometimes felt that it was like being in a forest where the eye saw nothing, yet the senses were aware of the existence of a living world full of vitality in close proximity, a world in which might prevailed over right, and the strong oppressed the weak. Now and then a cry or a whimper in the distance would bring a frown to Nissa's placid face. To Mrs. Barstow's question of "What is it?" she would reply shortly, "Some trouble among the women. They are so foolish; they have no self-control."

The Englishwoman felt as many have felt before who have trodden on the borders of that unknown

world, that in the dark recesses of the hareem there are no means of righting the wrong and meting out justice with an impartial hand. The wrong may be committed again and again with impunity ; and the injured has no way of obtaining redress and protection from future oppression. Any action on the part of the stranger to protect or enforce justice is followed by the same kind of strange unaccountable silence that falls on the traveller in the forest who makes his presence felt. The trees and vegetation seem suddenly depopulated of life. The hareem and the zenana seem curiously void and stagnant as soon as the eyebrow is lifted in silent enquiry, or the eye turns towards the direction whence the cry of pain or fear comes.

"I will do what I can ; but don't expect too much. You must know yourself that the hareem manages its own affairs and gets its way in most matters," she said ; her mind misgave her over the result of an attempt to defeat its machinations.

"You have found that out, have you, Mrs. Barstow ?" he said with amusement. "I was born in the hareem, and brought up in its atmosphere until I was sent to England to school. None of its tricks are hidden from me. If you will promise to stick to Nissa in the usual way as her companion, I will manage the rest. All I ask is that you do not resist if you find yourself carried off suddenly without time to prepare or pack up any luggage."

"I will be ready if you really want me, Captain Hassan," she answered ; adding as an afterthought, "but I sincerely hope that you will not be under the necessity of eloping with your own wife."

"I see no other alternative," he replied as he held out his hand in farewell.

The following afternoon Hassan presented himself at Mrs. Barstow's door. She met him in the verandah.

"I have come for Nissa's reply," he said before they could reach the little drawing-room whither she was leading him.

"I don't know what you will say," Mrs. Barstow replied. He could see she was not happy, and his heart sank in vague apprehension. "It is not what you expected."

"She refuses! Impossible! I will not believe it!"

"Yet it is so. She thinks that your father is right. A second marriage should be made and she hopes you will carry out the Nawab's wishes."

The words fell like lead; disappointment seized him in its grip, and speech came slowly and with difficulty.

"I—can—not—believe——"

"I speak the truth. I had plenty of time to talk privately with Nissa, and I went fully into the question. Her answer was decided from the very first. She never wavered; and nothing I could say had any effect on her determination. 'Tell him,' she said, 'that he will be very happy with the new wife chosen for him. He must forget the poor blind girl who so cruelly deceived him. She is happy knowing that he has forgiven her. She will be happier still when her beloved lord has taken to himself this second choice.'"

Hassan listened in dull misery, unable to recover from the unexpected blow.

"It is unnatural! it is not like Nissa! They must have bewitched her, drugged her, broken her brave spirit. My pearl! my rose! Light of my eyes! Oh! love of my life! how can I live without you!"

The tears sprang into Mrs. Barstow's eyes.

"This is cruel! cruel!" she said under her breath. "They are trying him beyond his strength." She touched him on the arm as he stood before her in the centre of the room. "Captain Hassan, try to bear it, and believe that it is God's will. We both have faith in the same great Deity, Who rules our destinies. He orders all things for the best."

He bent his head and covered his face with his hands. A quiver went through him as though a knife had entered his breast. Then the hands were lowered, and the finger nails met the palms as he grappled with

his disappointment. He looked at her with burning eyes.

"As you say, Mrs. Barstow, it is God's will."

He was about to leave her when she put out her hand.

"Stop one moment longer. I have something to give you from Nissa."

She offered him a very fine diamond ring. Hassan recognised it as one he had tossed into Nissa's lap at the ceremony of flower-throwing. "She sends you this with all her love and asks as a great favour that you will give it to your new wife as soon as the marriage is concluded. She begged me to carry back your promise to her that you would fulfil this request."

He took the ring. "She sent me this?" he said sadly. "Now I know that she has given me up; for she has taken it from her own finger where I have seen it every time I have been to my mother's room."

Hassan left without another word, without waiting to shake hands or take conventional leave of Mrs. Barstow. She looked after his retreating figure as he strode out by the verandah and walked away in the direction of his father's house.

"Poor fellow! and they say that there is no such thing as love in the harem! If any man ever loved a woman in this world, he loves Nissa, and to Nissa he ought to be united."

There remained yet one more loophole for escape. Until he was reduced to this Hassan was not aware of the extent of his faith in his brother's will. Before he left for his holiday Yasin had shown himself equally determined to get his way with his father. He had accepted Hassan's renunciation of Huleema with gratitude, happy in the belief that his elder brother would keep faith with him. If Yasin refused to give his consent to the marriage, Hassan intended to oppose his father. He would leave home early the next morning and ask to be allowed to return to his old quarters in the Nizam's palace. If that were refused, he would

rejoin his regiment and lead a soldier's life in barracks with the men of his own company.

He sent for Yasin as soon as he reached home. The boy came immediately. Hassan could not help noticing that he had lost his boyishness during the last four months. Trouble had had its effect on him as on Hassan himself, and he regretted that he himself had been the unwitting cause of the shadow that had fallen on the whole house. He recalled the tricks the boy had played on his mother, and the almost childish delight he had shown in the gift of the wonderful bridal bed.

Yet as he looked at Yasin he was surprised to see no sign of annoyance and vexation in his bearing. He must be aware of what was about to take place. On the morrow a deed, irreparable in its nature, would be done that should place enmity between the two brothers for life. In the face of all the preparations that had been made during Hassan's absence, Yasin could not be ignorant of the Nawab's designs.

"I have asked you to come and see me, little brother," said Hassan taking him by the arm in friendly fashion and leading him to a chair. "I want to talk over this second marriage my father is making for me. You remember the promise I gave you in the Bibi's room?"

"Yes; you were very good to say what you did; and at the time I called down a blessing from Allah and His Prophet on your head," said Yasin quietly.

"I am ready to redeem that promise. This evening I am going to my father, and I mean to tell him that Huleema Bee belongs to you, and that I will not marry her."

To his surprise Yasin received this announcement in silence. Hassan looked for another outburst of gratitude, but it did not come.

"I gave you my word that before considering marriage with her I would ask your consent. Such a request seems to me an insult; and I am ready to inform my father——"

"You need not trouble the Shahzada. I have seen him myself and given him to understand that I am ready to agree with his wishes. Another wife will be found for me ; and as soon as your wedding festivities are ended, mine are to be begun."

"You give up Huleema Bee?" asked Hassan, marvelling at the want of spirit shown by his brother in thus weakly resigning a woman he had professed to desire.

Yasin paused before replying. Then he spoke with hesitation.

"I—I efface myself before the interests of the eldest son of the house."

Hassan made an impatient exclamation. It was the old story of driving generation after generation down the beaten track of custom. When would the sons of Islam shake off the fetters of tradition and act in accordance with the dictates of their humanity? he asked himself for the fiftieth time.

"I cannot believe that you willingly give up Huleema Bee after all you told me of your hopes and desires," said Hassan whose heart sank at the prospect of the loss of this, his last hope.

"I have informed the Shahzada that I entirely submit to his commands," said Yasin placidly ; but he avoided his brother's eye.

He was not quite at his ease under this close catechising ; at the same time he showed no emotion, no objection whatever to being supplanted. Hassan could only conclude that all his previous professions about Huleema Bee meant nothing but a passing fancy ; and that sufficient pressure had been put upon him by the Nawab to bring him into line with the old man's wishes. But Hassan was not satisfied. He felt that he must have definite assurance that his brother had not been coerced and bullied into submission against his will, before he took a step that was irrevocable.

"I am not satisfied," he said. "You have not answered my questions. Do you willingly consent to my marriage with Huleema Bee?"

"Yes ; willingly," replied Yasin.

Hassan was silent. The reply was almost as much of a shock as Nissa's answer had been. He was at a loss for words. Yasin watched him with curiosity as he might have watched the struggles of some animal caught in a net ; and Hassan was conscious of a feeling of resentment at the boy's apparent ingratitude.

"You know, I suppose, that the wedding is to take place to-morrow after sunset?" said Hassan, his voice growing hard and unsympathetic.

"So my mother has told me."

"And you really wish me to—to——"

"To do as the Shahzada orders? yes, brother, certainly."

"It will make no difference in our friendly relations? You will not blame me afterwards for appropriating your bride?"

"Have no fear for the consequences, brother ; believe me, it will be for your happiness ; for the happiness of us all if you will consent to this second marriage."

He held out his hand and Hassan took it without a word. He had done his best to avoid doing his younger brother an injury, just as he had endeavoured honestly to be loyal to Nissa. The fates were against him, why should he fight against the will of Allah any longer? As Yasin escaped from the room with evident relief, Hassan dropped into his chair.

"They are all sheep following the Shahzada down the old track! Allah give me strength to play my part since there seems no way out of it!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

HASSAN let his head fall upon the nerveless arms extended on the table before him. It only remained now for him to go to his father and tender his submission—to play the contemptible part of the sheep himself, and follow down the old track like the rest at the bidding of the dominant master mind that ruled the house.

Suddenly he sprang to his feet. Why should he follow in the steps of the weaker members of the household? If a stand was to be made against a tyrannical old man, he was the one to do it. Should he seek his father at once and openly declare war? Should he refuse without excuse to obey? Such a course would involve words; bitter reproaches on his father's side, because of his son's undutiful conduct, and self-justification with possibly self-assertion on his own part. Thereby he would be committed to a line of conduct that would force him to break one of the articles of his faith.

No; he dared not trust himself in the presence of the Nawab; he dared not bring himself into contact with that iron will. In his renewed health the Shahzada had regained command of himself. He could keep his temper in the face of opposition, and was capable of levelling cold cutting reproof at a rebellious son, which would be far more difficult to bear with the respect due to a parent, than a torrent of hot angry abuse.

Hassan paced the room in perplexity; an English saying recurred again and again to his mind. "Flee from wrath!" He could not remember its origin. He

had heard it used at school, as a small boy ran away with a laugh from a bigger boy whom he had rashly irritated. The words suggested a way out of his difficulty. He would flee from the wrath which must be roused at his persistent refusal to comply with his father's demands. He called Yusuf, who was busy laying the cloth for dinner.

"Bring me the time-table," he said.

The order was obeyed

"Stay," he said as he took the list of trains. "I shall want you."

There was a train to Calcutta leaving at six thirty-five p.m. He looked at his watch. It was already past that hour. He could not wait till the next day. If he intended to make good his flight, he must go that very evening and he must leave the house secretly. Calcutta was in his thoughts, as he could join the Nizam and attach himself to His Highness's suite. He continued to study the time-table. A train started from Secunderabad at ten p.m. bound for Bombay and Delhi; he handed back the book.

"I find I have to leave this by the ten o'clock train. Let the other servants see to the dinner. You must come and help me to put together what things I require. Say nothing to any one. It is a small matter and concerns no one but myself."

Hassan and the man looked at each other. In Yusuf's eyes was a shadow of anxiety. Already he had become attached to his master; and it was no secret in the house that the young prince and his father were at variance. The Shahzada was compelling him to take a second wife against his will. Yusuf understood without being told that this sudden movement was nothing more nor less than an attempt on the part of his master to escape; an intention that for various reasons might not be as easy to accomplish as it looked.

"Will your honour require a gharry to drive to the station?" he asked.

"A hack-gharry? no; certainly not. Are there not

horses and carriages and motor-cars enough to take me to the station? Tell my chauffeur to have my own car ready by half-past nine. Say nothing of where he will drive; there is no necessity to give any order at present. Come to the dressing-room."

Yusuf obeyed in silence and before the dinner was on the table a couple of suit-cases had been packed.

"You will remain here in charge of my rooms and all my property. You will forward my letters to the address which I shall send you. It is possible I may want you to join me, in which case I will let you have full directions. You may have to bring me my uniform; you know where everything is."

Hassan returned to his sitting-room and unlocked a drawer. He took out a roll of notes for his journey, his bank-book and a travelling writing wallet. The money he put in his breast pocket; the writing case and bank-book he handed to Yusuf with some keys.

"Pack these up in one of the boxes. I am ready for dinner."

"Shall I put in any books for master to read?"

"No: I can buy what I want on the way."

He sat down to the table and did justice to the excellent fare provided. With this sudden decision his spirits had risen. A great weight was removed from his mind and he felt as if he had emerged from a horrible nightmare. He smiled as he pictured the consternation of the family at the loss of the festivities; and at the discomfiture of his father when he was brought face to face with the fact that after all his son had triumphed. There could be no marriage without a bridegroom. Perhaps to save the family honour Huleema would, after all, be given to Yasin. It would be the best solution of the difficulty: the easiest way out of the tangle into which affairs seemed to have drifted. When Nissa learned that Huleema was Yasin's wife, she would probably be induced to reconsider her refusal to come and live with him. He would write to Mrs. Barstow and enlist her on his side. If she would plead for him and put before

Nissa the necessity of fulfilling her wifely duty, all might come right in the course of time. Nissa had always proved herself dutiful and obedient to authority; that strong sense of duty only wanted rousing. Like all strong-willed men he was full of confidence and hope in the possibilities of the future. While he was strenuously opposing the will of another he was reckoning securely on obedience to his own wishes.

"Shall I order the car, sir? It is nearly nine o'clock," said Yusuf at his elbow.

"Not yet, plenty of time, the train leaves at ten and it only takes a few minutes for the car to reach the station."

"The train will be ready at the platform half an hour before it starts, sir. It would be best——"

"That will do, thank you," said Hassan shortly. As usual they spoke in English. "You can go, Yusuf, and I will call you when I want the car."

For a few seconds the servant stood as though in doubt. Something troubled his mind, but he was not encouraged to say what it was. His master was too much occupied with his own troubles to notice those of another man. Yusuf made one more effort to express his vague suspicions.

"The Shahzada——"

"Go," said Hassan interrupting him. "What the Shahzada says and does is no business of yours."

It was not often that Hassan spoke thus, and Yusuf was reduced to silence. He consoled himself with the thought that it was *kismet* and resigned himself to fate, but he looked after the retreating figure with anxious eyes as Hassan walked off in the direction of his mother's room.

The Begum glanced at him as he entered, searching his face for some sign that would give her the comfortable assurance that husband and son had become reconciled. She knew of Nissa's decision, and of Yaşin's relinquishment of all claim to Huleema's hand. She could detect nothing that indicated the giving way of

either. She knew the character of her husband and her son. The Nawab having determined on a course was not in the least likely to be turned from his purpose. His son had inherited that iron will. How could it end but in antagonism to the very last? Her clear insight into modern ways convinced her that it was rash on the part of the father to press his son too severely. He might defeat his own object even in the moment of apparent victory. Supposing that Hassan were forced through the marriage rite, no power on earth could compel him to live with his wife if he did not choose to do so. Force might accomplish much, but in this respect neither force nor moral suasion were of any use. The Shahzada was so sure of his methods, so satisfied that he could compass his ends. Had he been dealing with Yasin, he would doubtless have been successful, but with his first-born it was another matter.

Hassan seated himself in the chair that he usually occupied. His mother remained silent, wondering if he would touch on the subject that was uppermost in the minds of both.

"I have received a message from Nissa," he said after a short silence. "She wishes me to make this second marriage."

"I was given to understand that it would be so," said the Begum.

"You don't think that undue pressure has been brought to bear, do you?" he asked quietly.

"I am sure that she has acted freely and without prejudice," replied the Begum with more stress in her gentle voice than usual. "The matter was left entirely in Mrs. Barstow's hands, and we may be sure that she would behave honourably towards us and towards Nissa."

"If I marry Huleema Bee"—he laid emphasis upon the potentiality—"if I marry Huleema Bee, I shall still demand my rights with regard to Nissa, and Huleema will have to be content with a subordinate position now and by-and-bye."

The Begum regarded him wistfully. There was so much she would like to have said but her tongue was tied.

"I am sure that I may promise you that there will be no opposition from your father to any arrangement you may wish to make when once your marriage with Huleema is accomplished," she said.

"I am astonished at my brother's poor spirit," remarked Hassan, who inwardly resented Yasin's desertion of his cause. "He seems to have resigned Huleema without a struggle or a single remonstrance."

"He is a good, obedient boy!" exclaimed the Begum with sudden warmth.

"He is!" assented Hassan contemptuously.

He relapsed into silence, his mind too much occupied to notice the entry of Fazeela. She glanced at him and her eyes sought the Begum's with the uplifting of the brows. The reply was a signal to retire, and she departed as noiselessly as she had come, a smile hovering about the corners of her mouth.

"I have a good deal to do, mother. I think I will say good-night," said Hassan rising from his chair, still under the influence of brooding abstraction. As he leaned over her she roused herself from a reverie. Her hand clasped his wrist convulsively.

"My son! my beloved son! Is it not possible to—to——" Her agitation rendered her breathless, and the words refused to come.

"Mother! don't ask me!" he cried well knowing what she would have said.

"Your father! It is only right that he should be obeyed. It is due to every follower of the faith that he should receive the homage and obedience of his son. Your father gave it himself to his father. It is reasonable that he should in his turn look for what he so willingly rendered when he was young."

Hassan drew himself up and his mother's grasp loosened.

"In his case his father demanded nothing more than

could easily be given. Was there ever a sacrifice asked of him such as he is requiring from me?"

She was silent. Such a difficulty had never arisen. There had been no foreign, no infidel influence at work to cause a difference of opinion.

"My father, as you know, was not brought into conflict with his father through unreasonable demands on his part. Circumstances never arose to put him to the test. If he had been asked to do something that was contrary to the dictates of reason, something against which his whole nature rose in revolt, he would understand and perhaps have a little sympathy for me in my difficulty."

"He does understand, I am sure that he sympathises."

"Then why does he persist in his demand?"

"It is the principle involved, the necessity of rendering obedience to parents."

He looked at her critically. This was his father's argument; not hers.

"You don't think with him. If you had the courage to say so, you would wish to see me united to Nissa." As the Begum did not reply, Hassan continued with increasing warmth. "You have some influence with my father. Can you not put the matter before him? Point out that he goes beyond his province as father and man in asking me to join myself with a woman, to whom I have almost as much repugnance as if she were my sister; as, indeed, I have always believed she would be."

"I can do nothing! nothing! I know your father's will of old. He is determined to have your submission; he looks upon it as his right. Dear son, will you not yield? Think of the peace it would bring to the house! Your father would be happy again. I should have Nissa—I have been very lonely without her—and you! Believe me, beloved, you will find your true happiness in doing this thing against which you rebel."

He turned from her in distress, his lips closed with an expression of obstinacy that she knew of old on his

father's face. It gave little promise of yielding. Her heart sank, but she continued her pleading in spite of the despair that was overwhelming her.

"My son ! you promised that you would make this second marriage if Nissa would consent, and if Yasin waived all claim to Huleema Bee."

"I promised what I find I cannot perform," he said in a low voice.

"Son ! son ! it will be for your happiness !"

"May the Prophet keep you in safety, mother !" he said, turning away and walking to the door.

"Allah have mercy on you and guide you aright !" was the cry that pursued him.

The Begum looked after his retreating figure with burning eyes. Something in his bearing filled her with dread. Would he leave them and go back to that distant land which had already absorbed more than half his youth ? She might not see him for months or even years. The thought of losing him so soon after his return made her shudder. She could not bear it. He had asked her to plead for him with his father and she had refused, because it had seemed so hopeless ; but rather than let him go like this she was prepared to clutch at any straw. There was no reason why the attempt should not be made. The Shahzada was always kind, always ready to listen when she spoke.

She hastily summoned Fazeela ; and a messenger was sent with a request that the Shahzada would grant her an interview at once. The reply came back that she would be welcome at any time. The Nawab was not surprised at the request. He had a shrewd suspicion that she was coming to plead for her son, and beg for a concession on the part of the father since the boy remained obdurate. He smiled at the thought.

"Huzoor ! I come to ask a favour, a boon," she said falling on her knees by his side.

The Nawab stretched out a hand and laid it on the veiled figure. His touch was gentle and reassured her.

"Come and sit by me, here, and tell me all that is

in your heart, my queen," he said making room on the divan.

His words encouraged her, and she went straight to the point without preamble.

"It is about our son that I would speak. May Allah look with favour upon him! He is unhappy and we might so easily turn his unhappiness into joy."

"By giving in to his headstrong will, wife? That is not how our nation makes men of its sons. He who submits in his youth will know how to rule when power comes to his hand. Hassan must submit. Let him only say the one word I require—that he will obey his father like a good Musalman—and I will take care that his happiness is assured."

"If only the boy could see that your request was reasonable——"

The Nawab interrupted her.

"Since when have the followers of the Prophet been required to give reasons for the commands they may think fit to lay on the younger generation?" he demanded hotly.

"A little explanation——" pleaded the mother.

"Will be nothing but a great weakness. There shall be no explanation, not a word. Hassan either obeys me blindly and without question, or he refuses. On his obedience rests his whole happiness."

"May I not tell him even as much as that?"

"I forbid a word, a single word to be said."

"What if he disobeys—if he refuses to go through the marriage ceremony?" asked the Begum, who could see nothing but disaster before the two men she loved best in the world.

"I have always found that patience wins the victory in the long run. We have Nissa and Yasin with us. What can Hassan do but beat the air?"

"And break his heart!" rejoined the Begum in a sad voice.

"My sons are made of tougher stuff than that!" replied the Nawab proudly. "There will be no broken

hearts in this house, believe me, my beloved ; and yours must not be broken over this foolish obstinate boy."

He patted her gently on the arm. She knew the touch, and recognised the love that underlay it. The unspoken sympathy encouraged her to renew her attempt.

"Husband ! one little word ! Let me say to him just one little word !" she pleaded.

"Wife ! it shall not be. For the boy's sake I will have silence. He shall be left to follow the dictates of his own heart. They will lead him aright. Allah will show him how to be a faithful follower of the Prophet. I have no doubt but that all will come right in the end. Women behind the purdah are always timid and fearful ; yet some wives of our nation have been known to show courage. Take courage now and believe that in this matter I know what is best for our dearly loved son."

Again she felt the pressure of the firm hand of her husband. She slipped off the divan and knelt at his feet, bowing her head down upon his knees.

"Allah grant that you are right, my lord. I will try to be brave and believe that all is for the best ; but it breaks my heart to see our boy so unhappy."

A chink of silver anklets caused the Nawab to look up. Fazeela stood at the entrance of the room.

"Is it permitted for this servant to come before the Presence ?" she asked.

The Begum rose to her feet in sudden apprehension.

"What is it ?" asked the Nawab impatiently. He had no intention of discussing the subject with Fazeela.

"I have ventured to bring news which your Excellency should hear at once."

"Speak, woman ; what is it ?"

"The young Shahzada has left the palace."

If Fazeela looked for a sign of surprise or dismay she was disappointed. The Nawab remained cool and undisturbed by the announcement.

"This is what I have been fearing," said the Begum under her breath.

"Where has he gone?" asked the Nawab.

"He ordered his car, and Yusuf by his directions put two of his travelling boxes on the roof. Then the young Shahzada entered, and the driver was ordered by Yusuf to go to the station. It will be the night mail to the north that he has taken. Aiyoh! Bibi! the young master has got his way after all, and there will be no wedding."

Fazeela looked at the Nawab with questioning eyes.

"You are right ; there will be no wedding to-morrow, but it is only deferred. It will take place later on when our son returns ; perhaps this day week," said the Nawab quietly.

A smile was on his lips, but at the same time a fire gleamed in his eye in which was no mirth.

CHAPTER XXIX

HASSAN hurried away from his mother's room, glancing at his watch with dismay ; it was later than he thought and time to make the final preparations for his departure. The car was ordered, and his boxes carried down and placed upon it. At half-past nine he took his seat.

"Tell the man to drive to the station," he said to Yusuf.

Yusuf repeated the order, and the car moved forward with a jerk that nearly upset the servant. He had seized the handle of the door to reopen it with the intention of saying something to his master.

So far all had been simple and easy except his interview with his mother. Her unexpected appeal to his sense of filial duty had disturbed him more than a little. In spite of being modernised by Western teaching he was fundamentally a faithful follower of the Prophet. It honestly distressed him to be obliged to refuse to obey his father. If he had seen his way to compliance he would willingly have stretched a point, but obedience in this case involved the rendering up of a personal liberty that was the right of every man to exercise, whether he was of the East or of the West.

The car was closed, and as was often the case when he drove out in the evening the glass windows were replaced by venetians that excluded the night wind without shutting out the air altogether. They also obstructed the view, but as the driver knew the road, there was no need for Hassan to trouble himself about it.

They glided smoothly but slowly along. It was only a short distance to the station—not ten minutes' drive. In eight minutes' time the car slowed down still more, and a clatter of horses' hoofs fell on Hassan's ear. He pulled the check-string, but the chauffeur, a native, did not stop as he ought to have done. Hassan seized the telephone.

"Stop, Mahmood ! where are you driving ? I want to go to the station," he said with some impatience.

"Mahmood is ill, Huzoor. I am the Shahzada's chauffeur," was the reply given as they continued to crawl.

Hassan opened one of the venetian shutters so that he could see out of the window. To his intense astonishment and dismay he discovered that he was within the city gates. The car was pushing its way along a crowded street. Clattering around and behind him was an armed escort in his father's uniform.

"Stop ! I tell you ! stop !" he cried again.

"Cannot stop here, Huzoor, there are too many people in the street, they will give trouble. I will go just a little further and then stop," was the reply.

Even now Hassan, preoccupied as he was, seemed to be at a loss to understand what was happening. In another two minutes enlightenment came. The car drew up before the entrance of his father's city palace.

The house presented the same features as the palace belonging to Nissa's family. It was a block of buildings with nothing palatial about the outside. There was only one door opening on to the street, and this was armoured with iron bolts and nails. The windows were high up in the walls, and the mass of buildings was broken up with low verandahs and small balconies jealously screened with bamboo blinds.

Hassan got out of the car and turned furiously upon the driver. The guard—twenty-four men-at-arms—closed round him, dismounting and holding their horses with a loose rein.

"What is the meaning of this ?" he asked angrily.

"Did not Yusuf order you to drive to the station to catch the night mail?"

"Huzoor! it was the Shahzada's orders that you should first be brought here, and the Shahzada—may the Prophet protect him!—must be obeyed when he speaks."

The man's manner was apologetic, and he placed his hands together as if to plead forgiveness for something for which he was not responsible. Meanwhile the heavy door had opened, and one of Hassan's uncles, whom he knew well and had always liked, came forward with a warm greeting of welcome. A number of servants and several relatives followed, all dressed as if to receive an honoured guest.

"Welcome, son of my revered brother!" said the Sahib Murad ud Deen. "The Shahzada sent us word that you intended to pay us a visit before your marriage. He gave orders that you were to be received with all honour as if he himself had come, instead of his son."

During this ceremonious speech, delivered by the light of torches, two things happened that served to draw the net more tightly round the captive. The car quietly pushed its way out of sight and was escorted by half a dozen of the mounted sowars. As soon as it was clear of the crowd it glided away with all possible speed to the city gate on its return journey home. The other event was the gathering of the crowd in the street, an unruly rabble of noisy idlers, many of whom were excited with drugs and strong drink. They were kept at a reasonable distance by the escort, but it was manifest that the sowars were becoming impatient at the delay of the young Shahzada in entering the house, now that the Sahib himself had come to the door to greet him.

"I don't understand," said Hassan in bewilderment, as he saw his luggage carried into the house.

"If you will do me the honour to enter I will explain. We are very proud of being allowed to

entertain you," said the Sahib Murad, adding flowery speech to flowery speech as Hassan stood there in perplexity. The rabble began to shout questions to the escort generally as to why the young Shahzada had come, and whether the old Shahzada was following. "Please enter," said his uncle. "We cannot talk here. If you will walk up the steps I will follow."

Hassan glanced round with a wild impulse to run away. Had the car remained within reach he would have taken refuge in it, but it was gone, and he was left standing in the street with a growing consciousness that he had been outwitted. His father had seen that flight might be a possible temptation. Unknown to Hassan's servants he laid his plans with such skill that his son walked unsuspectingly into the trap. Hassan's own chauffeur was removed, and another man, on whom the Nawab could rely, was substituted. Yusuf's suspicions were aroused, but the secret of the Nawab's plans was as carefully withheld from him as from his master. He had tried to warn Hassan during the evening but was unsuccessful. Again, when he discovered that the chauffeur had been changed, his suspicions were once more aroused; he would have opened the door to communicate the fact to his master and was nearly knocked over in his attempt.

Hassan observed that the escort and some of the servants had formed themselves into a line round him. Had he wished to retrace his steps on foot, he could not have done so without breaking through their ranks. Behind the guard was the ever-increasing crowd, trampling the dust into clouds and shedding a scent of oiled humanity and unwashed clothes on the night air. A voice was raised from the outskirts of the assembly.

"Darkness and light! did ever they meet! How long will light pursue darkness?"

Hassan recognised the faqir of the black panther. Some instinct prompted him to call to the unseen fanatic.

"Peace be with you, follower of the Prophet."

"The peace and mercy of Allah be with thee, my son. There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His Prophet! Follow the teaching of the Prophet and Allah will look with favour upon thee. Pass on, my son! and may the blessing of Allah be thine!"

Hassan turned without a word and walked up the steps, entering the door of what he knew now would be his prison during his father's pleasure. Whether the true reason for his arrival at that time of the evening was known to his uncle he could not tell. Directions had been sent that he was to be an honoured guest. A sense of imprisonment would not be felt unless he tried to spread his wings.

The Sahib followed close at his heels with evident relief at finding himself safe within the walls of his house. There was no telling what might happen if the crowd became over-clamorous. The sowars armed to the teeth had ready hands for their weapons; and patience was not one of the virtues of a Rohilla man-at-arms or a Rajput sowar.

The heavy armoured door was shut; the guard sprang to their saddles and rode off to their stable barracks. The crowd dispersed as quickly as it had gathered, and the dust settled back upon the road and masonry.

Hassan was courteously conducted to his room. The house was well known to him, although he had not entered it for some time past. As a child he occasionally spent a few days in the city palace with Fazeela and Yasin. The boys delighted in the change. They boated on the beautiful Mir Alam lake, and picnicked on the grassy shore under the thick cool shade of the tamarind trees. They rode on elephants, always accompanied by a mounted escort, and spent happy afternoons at the tombs of the old kings of the Deccan at Golconda chasing each other through the ancient arcades with happy shouts and laughter. They came home to wonderful pillaos of chicken, which they fancied tasted better than any they ever had in their

father's palace ; and after supper when they ought to have gone to bed, they escaped into the dusk of the hareem garden ; or raced up and down the labyrinth of passages, Yasin toddling behind at Hassan's heels, terrified of the jinns and shaitans he loved to personate.

The room prepared for Hassan was provided with English furniture. A sitting-room next to it possessed a table and a few easy chairs but nothing more. Books, pictures, ornaments, curtains or anything suggestive of European comfort and occupation were absent.

"You have dined, my son ; and you would wish to retire to bed ; so your revered father—May the Prophet protect him !—says in his letter."

Hassan could only assent. It was past ten. The place was dimly lighted and he had nothing to do. Sleep, however, was far from his eyes ; he did not mention the fact to the Sahib, as he was in no mood to listen to the garrulous old man. The events of the evening had left a sensation of confusion of mind. He wanted time to think. Beneath the bewilderment was a smouldering fire of anger ; anger against his father ; and equally against himself for having been so easily trapped. He might have known that the idea of escape would have occurred to the clear-sighted Nawab ; and that he would take every possible precaution to prevent it. Hassan's life in England had blunted the edge of his naturally suspicious temperament and taught him to look for straightforward dealings in men of his own rank. He had to remind himself that not only was he in the East, but he was the subject of a native State, where British influence scarcely touched the surface.

He bade his uncle good night, and with difficulty preserved an outward show of patience at the lengthy conventional speeches the Sahib thought necessary to make to his visitor. When at last he was alone, he spent an hour alternately pacing up and down the room and sitting in one of the easy chairs. At last wearied with the monotony of his exercise, he went to bed, but only to toss restlessly until the small hours of the

morning. The sounds of the diminishing traffic in the streets came faintly through the open window, bringing back the days of his childhood, and the memory of the implicit unquestioning obedience that was always accorded to the Nawab.

Then the scene of his recent arrival recurred. The armed escort was a real guard, had he only known it; and he was nothing more nor less than their prisoner. He wondered idly where the guard had picked up the car. He detected no sign of their presence when he moved out of the courtyard of the palace. They must have been waiting for him on the road between the palace and the city. The words of the faqir came back with vivid distinctness; the stereotyped confession of faith, the salaam of peace, and finally the orthodox advice to follow the teaching of the Prophet. It was repeated by the fanatic mechanically. He would have said exactly the same thing to any other person who had bestowed largess upon him; not that he was grateful; but money was paid to such men for the purpose of extracting a blessing; and the faqir had not forgotten that Hassan had given him gold on a former occasion. It was rare for the precious metal to be thrown to a street mendicant; small silver and copper coins were the customary gifts. "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His Prophet. Follow the teaching of the Prophet and Allah will give His blessing." What was that teaching but obedience to parents?

Hassan fell asleep repeating the sentences, and he passed into dreamless oblivion. His troubles were forgotten and his anger dispersed. When he awoke the next morning the early rays of the sun penetrated the window fixed high up in the wall, and a square yellow patch of sunlight greeted his eyes. Where was he? A host of awakening memories brought back the events of the previous night and he sat up, all his activities of mind and body returning upon him with a rush.

A quiet footfall made him look round. It was with

positive pleasure that he recognised Yusuf. In his hand the man carried the tray of coffee and rolls that Hassan was accustomed to have on rising.

"When did you come?" he asked as Yusuf held out his dressing-gown.

"Early this morning, sir. The Shahzada sent me down to the city in the car, so that no time should be lost. He gave me orders that I was to serve your honour as if I was still at the palace at Khairatabad."

"Good; I shall want you to go back this morning with a message," said Hassan. He seated himself in a cane lounge that Yusuf had pushed up to the little table on which he had placed the tray. "Is the car here?"

"No, sir; it returned at once by the Shahzada's orders. Your honour's servant is in the same position as your honour. Guards surround the house and keep watch before every door so that none may go out or come in without their permission. We are to stay here during the Shahzada's pleasure. If your honour has a letter or message, it can be sent by one of the sowars."

"Very well; I will speak to the Sahib about it," replied Hassan. "Bring me a newspaper or a book—something to read as I take my coffee."

Yusuf departed to execute the order and returned five minutes later with a copy of the Quran. There were no other books in the house, he said, and the newspaper had not come. He laid the volume on the table and Hassan opened it. It was some time since he had spent any time over reading the Prophet's book of the law. Unlike the untravelled Muhammadan, he read with his brain as well as his eye, bringing his education to bear on words and sentences which his fellow men repeated with parrot-like iteration. His study was interrupted by the arrival of his uncle.

The Sahib Murad greeted his nephew warmly and with the ceremonious politeness of the old world. It was a great pleasure to the elderly man to have a visitor like Hassan, and he intended to make the most of it;

for who could say how soon the autocratic head of the family might summon him back. As soon as the flowery speeches were ended Hassan remarked with some abruptness—

“So I am a prisoner here at my father's pleasure.”

“Your father—may Allah give him a long life!—does not call you a prisoner. He wishes you to remain with us a few days, and he has asked me to make you comfortable. You slept well, I hope.”

“You may tell my father that imprisonment is no use. My will is as strong as his; my patience as great.”

“Of course we know that the young tiger is not born without claws, but he does not use them against his own sire. You speak like a brother, not like a son. A son may be even stronger in will than his father; but yet, if he is a faithful follower of the Prophet, he will submit to his father's decrees.” Then he reverted to the subject of his anxiety, Hassan's comfort. “My brother sent Yusuf here early this morning. He has orders to provide you with everything you require. Do you remember this house? You were often here as a child. I was then a young man and just married. I can recall you in your little green satin coat embroidered with gold. You and your tiny brother were always so pleased to come here for a few days. Children and dogs are always delighted with a change of place, they say. Yasin was a young rogue. You had your love of mischief as well; but it was Yasin who was always playing shaitan, and you who pretended to be terrified.”

His uncle rambled on with long disjointed accounts of the early days, recalling numbers of scenes and incidents to Hassan's mind. His father also figured in these recollections. As Hassan sat smoking cigarette after cigarette, he was beguiled by the older man into forgetting the immediate trouble of his life, and he was carried back into a happy past wherein no conflict of wills bred strife and discord.

They separated; but after breakfast the Sahib Murad

reappeared, smiling, bland and again full of reminiscent chat.

"Come up to my room," he said. "I have a pleasant verandah where we can get more air."

He did not mention that there also he had his beloved huqa and a pile of soft cushions more than enough for himself and his visitor.

"I should like to take a walk in the town," remarked Hassan.

"No one of our standing walks in the city. You would be jostled and perhaps robbed if you went alone and unarmed."

"I should have nothing on me to tempt a thief. However, perhaps you are right. I will telephone for my car. Where is the telephone?"

"Just outside my room."

He led the way and they went up two flights of stone steps. The air became fresher and a wide verandah let in more light. Hassan applied himself to the telephone, and was put into communication with his family. He recognised the voice of a cousin; and a conversation ensued in which his convictions were confirmed. He was undoubtedly a prisoner.

"Well? what was the result? Is the car coming?"

"No," replied Hassan shortly. "My father sends a message to say that he wishes me to remain in the house for the present; unless I choose to come back and keep my engagement for to-night."

"That means your marriage," remarked his uncle quietly. "And after all, why should you object?"

"Why should my father insist?"

"Your father is a very wise man; and if you were wise you would rely upon his judgment and conform to his wishes. I remember——"

Again he rambled off into tales of the past, rousing the younger man's interest in spite of himself. He told him the story of Hassan's first sword. With an imperiousness that was characteristic he would not be content with a toy weapon. He must have a real sword.

"Your father ordered one to be made, and allowed you to wear it when you were only nine years old. It was a fine tempered piece of steel capable of dealing a death-blow. I ventured to say that it was unwise, as you were always headstrong. His reply was, 'Will the young elephant become a pig? I will trust my son to use his sword as a nobleman.' I thought my brother made a mistake and I told him so. If the father's heart is too soft, the child's heart is apt to harden."

Hassan said nothing, but the words went home. Now and then the Sahib drew a whiff from the huqa. Then he beat up his pillows, settled himself down again and started with a fresh string of memories. So absorbed was Hassan in his uncle's reminiscences that he was astonished when Yusuf came to say that lunch was ready.

He went down to his sitting-room. It was quiet and dull. He wondered if any letters had arrived for him, and whether they would be sent on. Again he asked for a newspaper; but was informed that the Sahib did not take one. He told Yusuf to find a messenger who could be sent to his father's palace; and he wrote a letter asking for certain books that were lying on the writing-table in his room, together with his letters and newspapers.

The messenger went to the palace and returned, saying that he had been kept waiting as the Shahzada was occupied. He brought neither books nor letters, nor even an answer to his note.

At four o'clock Hassan went down to the inner courtyard. On his appearance half a dozen men-at-arms sprang to their feet, and hastened forward with military salutes to receive his orders.

"I am going for a walk. Three of you must come with me to the Char Minar."

"It is against the orders of the Shahzada to go into the town, Excellency," said one of the men with scrupulous respect.

"We dare not disobey the order, your Honour," said another.

"The Shahzada is just and never gives an order without reason, but once given it must be obeyed, Huzoor," said a third.

Hassan turned impatiently from the men and walked straight to the door. It was locked and the key had been removed.

"By the order of the Shahzada," said a fourth man who was on guard. "Huzoor, we serve the Shahzada now. One day we shall serve your Excellency as faithfully as we now obey the Nawab. If your Honour would eat the air, there is the hareem garden. The Sahib has given directions that you are to walk there as often as it pleases the Presence."

Hassan proceeded to the small enclosure honoured by the name of hareem garden. It was nothing but a courtyard open to the sky and overgrown with vegetation. High walls surrounded it on all sides excluding the breeze. The scent of the city dominated the jasmine and oleander blossom—the sickly smell of garlic and curry in the making, the heavy odour of sandalwood oil, and the pungent wood smoke from many kitchens. Hassan was about to turn back into the house when his uncle's voice greeted him.

"I am so glad to find you here," he said, smiling with a pleasure that was genuine. "Do you remember the well and the wicked trick you played upon your father?—may Allah give him peace!"

"I have forgotten," said Hassan, who was trying to smother the irritation he felt at the galling restriction to his liberty.

"Then you will enjoy the story all the more."

As they paced up and down the paths he launched out into a long tale of how Hassan in a fit of impish mischief threw his own coat and cap into the well, and then hid in a disused room at the top of the house; from the window he could look into the garden and watch the search that he knew would take place. His

father had forbidden him to play near the well. The parapet was low and there was considerable danger lest the boys should fall in. The restriction galled the impatient spirit of the boy, and this was his method of retaliating upon his over-anxious parent. He told Yasin that he intended throwing himself down the well, because his father was so unkind ; and this was repeated when Hassan was found to be missing.

"We sent at once for your father. He was then in the Council ; and he had to be summoned from the Council Chamber. His Highness, the late Nizam, was extremely kind and sympathetic. He closed the proceedings, and set your father at liberty. I sent his elephant for him and he was brought straight here. How we hunted through the gardens ! and then we dragged the well. We found some toys that you had thrown in because you had quarrelled with your brother over them ; also your cap and shoes and the green satin coat but no body."

They had arrived at the well and were seated on the stone coping.

"I have a faint recollection of playing some trick of the kind, now you mention it," said Hassan.

"You little knew the pain and grief you were causing. Your father—may he live a thousand years !—descended into the well himself to superintend the operations. At the risk of being bitten by snakes he used the drag himself, continuing long after the watermen had assured him that you were not there. Finally I led him to the house, wet through and chilled to the bone. He sat down and covered his face with his hands. At his feet lay the drabbled clothes and shoes and toys. 'My little son ! my first-born ! the moon of my life ! My days will be darkened for ever if I have to live without thee !' he said in a manner that nearly broke my heart to hear. I shall never forget his distress. Until then we had no notion how great his love was for you. We thought that his mind was given entirely to the government of the State, and that he had no time

to pay attention to his family, but we were wrong. Your three little brothers died as babes, and there were only you and your sister Suffoorah left to the Begum and your father, and you were the apple of his eye."

Hassan was touched more than a little. The event so fraught with anxiety for his parents was a trivial half-forgotten incident in his memory.

"I was a little shaitan to distress my father in that way. I ought to have been beaten."

"So I ventured to say, but your father would not hear of it. He made excuses for you, declaring that your heart was in the right place, and that you would make a fine man in time if only you could be brought under discipline. That, he said, you would get in England."

"Where was I all the time?"

"In the room over the uppermost balcony," said the Sahib Murad, pointing to a small window. "It was hunger that brought you out. I met you on the stairs creeping down towards the kitchen, your nostrils filled with the smell of the pillao you loved so well. I said, 'You naughty wicked boy! you have made your poor father shed hot tears of grief! He thinks you are dead!' Away you flew to find him. To his intense relief he suddenly beheld his little son at his feet, crying in abject penitence for forgiveness. Do you never use the huqa? Come to my room and take a few mouthfuls. It is very soothing. My man prepares mine without drugs and makes it very mild."

CHAPTER XXX

THREE days passed with the same monotonous routine. Each time Hassan attempted to leave the house he was confronted by guards, armed with the Shahzada's orders as well as a full complement of weapons. The only exercise and fresh air obtainable was in the hareem garden, where he walked twice in the day. His uncle usually joined him, and they frequently rested on the coping of the well. The story was not alluded to again, but whenever Hassan approached the scene of his heartless escapade he thought of his father and the love he bore his son.

Every day Hassan rang up his 'people to inquire after the health of his parents ; to demand liberty which was promised indefinitely ; and to ask for his letters and some books which were not sent.

In addition to the Sahib Murad there were other members of the family living in the house. They came and went on their various errands, apparently full of business, but no one from the highest to the lowest was allowed to enter or depart except through a door that was guarded. Some of the Sahib's relatives were employed in the Nizam's service, military or civil. They all treated Hassan with the respect due to the son of the head of the family ; and those who had leisure to talk were never tired of listening to Hassan's account of his experiences in Europe. His uncle, however, was his more frequent companion, and he cared nothing for stories of the unknown West which he would never see ; he preferred to do the talking himself and carry his hearer back to earlier days.

The most irksome feature of Hassan's imprisonment was its inactivity. The indolent life of eating, sleeping, smoking, and idle chatter on personal subjects was not to his taste ; and he longed to be back at work with the Nizam, fatiguing as his duties frequently were.

"When does His Highness come back ?" he asked of his host on the third morning.

"His return has been delayed for ten days. His Highness has gone to Delhi to choose a site for the palace which he intends to build there, now that the town is to be the seat of the British Government. It is possible that you may require a house at Delhi yourself one day."

"I ! why should I need a house ?"

"His Highness's Prime Minister should be lodged, like himself, in a suitable manner. You would not need such a large building, perhaps ; and it would be unbecoming in a subject to possess a palace as magnificent as that belonging to his sovereign ; but it is certain that some sort of a house will be necessary——"

Hassan laughed incredulously.

"I shall never be Prime Minister !"

"That is not your father's opinion. He—may Allah preserve him !—always expressed his firm belief that you would one day distinguish yourself. 'He will rise by his own merits, brother,' he has said to me many times. 'I cannot lift him by my wealth or by my good will ; but he will do it for himself. There is that in my boy which makes for success and honour.' Your father is a very clear-sighted man, and his judgment is good. So I say that one day the Nawab Hassan ud Deen will require a house at Delhi worthy of the Prime Minister of Hyderabad."

The Sahib Murad looked at Hassan with a proud confident smile that was not without a seductive flattery of its own.

"I hope the new capital will prove healthy," remarked Hassan, with the laudable intention of turning the conversation to a less personal topic.

"No doubt the doctors will see to the sanitation. The drainage of Hyderabad used to be very bad with its open sewers. It was wonderful what Sir Salar Jung did for the city. He was a man to be proud of! He put a stop to the fighting which went on continually in the streets, and he gave us our present system of police; but his best work was in the improvement of the public health. I remember after one of your visits to this house you developed a malignant fever and you nearly died; enteric, I think they called it. My brother's distress of mind was terrible. He called in His Highness's physician; also the Residency surgeon and another English doctor who was said to be very clever in all fevers. The fees he had to pay were high, but he paid them willingly; and when you were out of danger he gave alms to a thousand poor Muhammadans. I shall never forget the day he came to tell me that you were convalescent. Do you remember being ill?"

"No; I have no recollection of any dangerous illness."

"You could not have been more than three years old at the time, too young to remember. Even if you could recall it, you would not have known how ill you were, nor how troubled he was. Parents hide these things from their children, knowing that the younger generation cannot understand. Is it likely that you could realise, even at your age, the anxieties of fatherhood unless you were a father yourself?"

The Sahib Murad related in detail his own sensations when a favourite daughter was laid up with a low fever. Hassan gave him only half his attention. His thoughts were occupied with this new side of his father's character which his uncle had revealed to him; this unsuspected fount of love poured out upon a son whose gratitude seemed in many respects wanting. His father, since his return from Europe, had appeared tyrannical and unreasonable. In the irritation caused by the conflict of wills, the son had lost sight of all signs of paternal affection, and was in danger of forgetting that it ever

existed. The unexpected revelation was arresting and disturbing. This man of whose proofs of love he was continually hearing, was the man whom he, Hassan, was strenuously opposing. The younger was setting the will of the older aside, and claiming an equality and independence which was contrary to the teaching of religion and tradition. As he listened to the never-ending reminiscences of the Sahib Murad, the hot blood mounted to his forehead. It was always the same story of sacrifice and devotion on the part of the parent, and a careless unresponsive acceptance on the part of the son.

It was the afternoon of the fourth day. Hassan was sitting in his uncle's room. He was in Muhammadan dress, a long coat of fine dove-coloured cloth finely embroidered in the same tint. It was buttoned from neck to waist. He wore no jewellery except the diamond ring that had been sent by Nissa with the request that he would give it to his new wife. He had taken it from Mrs. Barstow and slipped it on his little finger, and it had been allowed to remain there.

He was leaning back in a low arm-chair. The Sahib was extended on his divan among his pillows. He had been giving Hassan an account of the grief of the Nawab and the Begum when they were obliged to send their son to England to school. The Sahib had experienced a similar grief over the departure of his own first-born for Calcutta for his education. Gradually the garrulous good-natured voice ceased, and a deep breath announced the fact that he had fallen asleep.

Hassan's mind was busy with the past. He recalled his own selfish delight at the prospect of visiting a foreign land and of going to a big English school. Never once had a thought crossed his mind that what was unalloyed pleasure to himself might bring pain to others. His reverie was disturbed by the entrance of a servant, who came to announce the arrival of no less a person than the Shahzada himself. The Sahib was

roused to sudden wakefulness, and the two men hurried down to the entrance.

The Nawab was still seated in the gilded howdah, waiting to be welcomed according to etiquette on his descent from the elephant. The big beast was ordered to kneel, and Hassan himself gave his father a hand to help him to step down the short ladder. The Nawab immediately moved up to the verandah and entered the door, followed by his brother and son. The door was closed upon the street with its gaping crowd attracted as usual by the glittering escort and the elephant.

Hassan and his uncle gave the courteous salaam due to a superior. Their example was followed by the household hastily assembled as the news of the Nawab's arrival was made known. The Shahzada's eyes rested longingly on his son. The boy was very dear to his heart; never more so than when he was wearing the national dress. He could not help thinking with a father's pride that in the simple well-fitting grey coat and the neat white and gold turban, there was not a handsomer young Musalman to be found throughout the Deccan. The Nawab made no remark, however; he acknowledged the ceremonious greetings, and then without haste led the way to the Sahib's room at the top of the house. The company so suddenly summoned was dispersed and sent back to its various occupations.

"My eyes ached for a sight of my son," said the Nawab simply, as he seated himself on the divan.

"I am not suprised, brother. It has been a great pleasure to me to have him here so long. We have had many happy talks," replied Murad, settling himself down by the side of the Nawab.

"You will have no more of him for the present, as I have come to give Hassan his liberty." He turned to Hassan, who stood silent with surprise. "You are free, my son. You may pay a visit to Calcutta or Bombay or Delhi, whichever you please, and you can start when you like. I am in no hurry about your marriage, it may wait your pleasure."

"You still insist on it, sir?"

"I still insist," quietly replied the Nawab. "I ask you, as I have asked you many times before, to comply with my wishes and consent to marry Huleema Bee; but there is no need for undue haste."

"Then you did not marry her to Yasin on the evening appointed for the wedding?"

"I did not."

"What if I refuse, Excellency?"

"Then you do not fulfil the whole duty of the faithful. However, I can wait. I am content to wait"—he glanced up at Hassan with quick scrutiny—"because I believe that my son will do the right thing sooner or later."

There was a pause. Through the verandah into which the room opened the sounds of the street floated from below—the murmur of the crowd, the clash of arms, the stamping of the fly-tormented horses and the occasional snort of the elephant. Above all the various noises rose the single penetrating voice of the faqir of the black panther. He waited for the occupant of the gilded howdah to reappear in the certainty that largess would be forthcoming.

"Darkness and light! day and night! There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His Prophet! Let the faithful keep the law and Allah will send His blessing."

"I will return home at once," said Hassan abruptly.

"You will be welcome, my son, to your mother as well as myself. Your car is at the door. Tell your servant to get your luggage ready."

Hassan left the room and the Nawab turned to his brother, who answered the unspoken question that he felt was on the father's lips.

"He has behaved excellently well, brother. We expected rage and fury, but there was none. The West has taught him self-control."

"But it has made him headstrong," quickly rejoined the Nawab.

"The restive bullock is the bullock that will carry its load."

"And he will carry his load when the time comes. I gave him a European education by the advice of the late Nizam—may his soul rest in peace!—but though I took the advice, I never intended to make my will subservient to his, nor to allow him to relax his duties as a faithful follower of Islam. Whilst he has been with you he has had time to think. Whatever he does now will not be done in haste."

A little later Hassan re-appeared. He had exchanged his grey coat for European dress, but he still wore the turban.

"I am ready, father, have I your permission to go?"

"Certainly, my son."

The Nawab rose and they all went down together. After a ceremonious leave-taking the Shahzada, in full Muhammadan dress, mounted his elephant. He was a noble representative of the old school, proud of his conservatism, and full of self-congratulation that he had changed in nothing. Hassan in his Westernised dress represented modern Islam to his finger tips, as he stepped into the latest invention for locomotion, the motor-car. If he gave a thought to the subject it was to congratulate himself on bringing an enlightened understanding and an up-to-date mind to bear on the obsolete conservatism of his forbears.

The black panther was lazily washing its face as it sat on its haunches by the side of its tatterdemalion master. Its glossy coat shone in the sun, and inky rosettes were faintly discernible upon its black fur. The Nawab from the howdah cast a sovereign at the faqir's feet. It brought an immediate response.

"The peace and mercy of Allah be on thee, Protector of the poor! Peace goes before thy footsteps, and the Prophet leads the faithful into light."

Amid a ceremonious salaaming the cavalcade started, the car with the young prince proceeded in front and soon out-distanced the old noble and his retinue. It

was with a feeling of intense gratification that Hassan regained his own comfortable suite of rooms. Yusuf and the boxes appeared half an hour later.

"Shall I unpack, sir?" asked the man.

Hassan glanced up from the accumulated correspondence which he was looking through, and became aware for the first time that he had formed no plans for the future. Was he to be allowed to continue his bachelor life in peace indefinitely? or was there to be a limit with the fixing of a day later on? If the latter prospect confronted him, the desire to escape from the house would remain as strong as ever. He would ask for an interview that very evening and learn his fate from his father. He turned to Yusuf.

"Leave the suit-cases as they are for the present. I have not decided yet whether I remain or go to Delhi."

He resumed his occupation, destroying the letters that required no answer and putting aside those that needed a reply. Dinner was served with the customary care, and as Hassan sat down to it a sense of comfort and civilisation came over him such as he had not felt since he left his father's palace to take the night mail. He was glad to be back among his books and pictures and the numerous accessories of modern European life, with which he had surrounded himself.

After coffee and a cigarette he rose, and with something like a sigh proceeded to his father's room, where he was expected at a certain hour. The thought of renewing the conflict was distasteful, but his inherent obstinacy prompted him to go with his mind made up to persevere in his opposition. If his father pressed the point, he determined to announce his intention of leaving home and of joining the Nizam's suite.

The Nawab was dressed for the reception of his son as if he were an honoured visitor of his own age and standing. It was a compliment, and Hassan could not help admiring the stately dignity with which the old man carried himself. He wore the richly-embroidered coat that he had put on for his son's return from Europe.

A sparkling jewelled necklace lay on his breast. His turban was adorned with the same beautiful ornament of brilliants; and round his waist was fastened a handsome sword-belt with sword and scabbard worthy of royalty. The Nawab looked up with a smile as Hassan approached.

"Welcome, my son! Are you not glad to be back again? I remember of old how, as a child, you used to delight in a visit to our city palace; but your joy on returning here was even greater than your delight in leaving."

"I am very glad to be home again, sir."

"Your mother is looking forward to seeing you. You must go to her after we have had a talk. May I be permitted to know what you intend doing; and if you mean to stay with us?"

The mode of inquiry jarred on Hassan's ears. The question was put in a manner that did not become the imperious old noble. He would have felt happier if the Nawab had spoken in his usual autocratic tone.

"My movements—if I am allowed my liberty——" he glanced at his father with a question in his eyes, as he hesitated and left his sentence unfinished.

"You are given full liberty, my son, to go where you please or to stay under my roof," said the Nawab quietly.

"My movements will depend on your demands, Excellency. My object in attempting to leave the palace was to escape marriage. Have you given up your intention of marrying me to Huleema Bee?"

"No, my son; the obligation to fulfil our contract remains."

"And if I go to Calcutta or join His Highness at Delhi, what then?"

"We shall be obliged to wait till you return?"

"What if I never return?"

"It is unthinkable," replied the Nawab calmly. "No living son of this house ever absented himself for more than a limited time."

The placid belief of the Nawab in the events taking a usual rather than an unusual course was disconcerting. After a slight pause Hassan said a little stiffly—

“Have I your leave, sir, to start for Delhi to-morrow night?”

“You have.”

The words were spoken so quietly that Hassan glanced at his father in questioning surprise. The Shahzada's head was bent, and there was a droop about the old shoulders that seemed to show the patient endurance of a trouble brought upon him by none other than his beloved son. Something stirred within Hassan's breast. A second self appeared to be remonstrating with the spirit of rebellion. He stifled it and said—

“Then with your permission I will go by the ten o'clock mail to-morrow evening.”

The Nawab bowed his head in acquiescence but made no reply. He put up his long thin hand and leaned his head upon it, shading the eyes that had so lately shone with deep paternal love and pride.

“I may take my leave, Excellency?” asked Hassan.

“You may, my son.”

The voice quivered slightly as it might have quivered when the Nawab told the news to his brother of the dangerous illness of his little son from the deadly malarial fever. Hassan heard the break, and it sent a sharp pain through his heart. He waited, hoping that his father would look up and give him his blessing, but the Nawab remained in exactly the same position. He moved towards the doorway, and again paused to look back. Somehow he felt that he could not go—this time in cold blood—without his father's blessing. In the eyes of the followers of the Prophet the paternal benediction means so much. When sanction is given for any course to be taken, a commendation to Allah and His Prophet always follows.

The Nawab moved his hand from his forehead and covered his eyes, as though to shut out the figure of

the child who was forsaking him in his old age. The pathetic movement, made unconsciously, struck home this time with startling effect. In another moment Hassan was back and at his father's feet.

"Huzoor! I cannot leave you like this! I cannot leave you at all! Your will is mine! Father! beloved father! I will do as you wish."

The Nawab's eyes shone under his thick white eyebrows; not with triumph but with love.

"My son! my first-born! May the blessing of Allah rest upon you! May the Prophet give you the happiness you deserve!" said the Nawab in a voice broken with emotion.

He was deeply moved. The triumph of victory was forgotten in the joy of finding that after all the metal rang true. His son had shown himself to be a faithful follower of the Prophet in bowing to his father's will and tendering his obedience.

CHAPTER XXXI

IT was the day for the nikah ceremony. A nikah marriage can be performed with certain entertainments that accompany the shahdee, ceremonious visits and the presentation of gifts, flowers, fruit, and sweet-meats. It depends on the wealth and tastes of the two families. On the other hand, it may be made a simple affair with little ceremony and no entertainments at all. The essential part of the nikah is the simple declaration before witnesses that the two principals are willing to become husband and wife. At the same time the dowry is agreed upon. The contract may be put on paper ; but the verbal testimony of the witnesses present is sufficient.

On this occasion, when Hassan had begged to have the rites shortened as much as possible, there was to be no writing nor signing of deeds. In deference to his son's wishes the Nawab consented to a simple verbal contract.

Immediately after sunset Hassan with his father and his brother Yasin entered the Begum's room. A large gathering of the household was assembled, and the company seemed in the best of spirits. Some of the women were veiled, and Hassan took them for Huleema's relatives. As the three men entered, a hush fell on the party, and all eyes were fixed upon the grave and serious bridegroom. The dresses and jewels were magnificent ; and the Shahzada, as he glanced round, regretted that he had not arranged for the ceremony to take place in the Durbar hall, where the colour and glitter would have had space for a suitable display.

The Nawab himself had put on a long velvet coat and several jewelled ornaments. In his turban was the same handsome diamond aigrette that he wore at Nissa's wedding. Hassan's quick eye noticed it as he joined his father; and the sight of it sent home a sharp reminder of his feelings on that occasion. They were very different from those which swayed him now. He himself wore Muhammadan dress. Over his white garments he had slipped on the black embroidered coat he appeared in when he returned home. A grim humour had seized him as he dressed. It was the mourning colour of the British people. His parents would see nothing incongruous in it, perhaps; but he was conscious of a kind of gloomy satisfaction in the sombre colour as he thought of the death of his hopes.

The bride, veiled from head to foot, was seated on the divan usually occupied by the Begum. Hassan's parents stood by her side; Yasin, his mother, and Huleema's veiled relatives were close behind. It occupied but a short time for Hassan to declare that the lady present was his wife; this declaration was the marriage contract that bound the woman to him, and him to the woman, until divorce or death separated them. He was asked if he had no gift to bestow upon his bride. He drew the diamond ring from his finger and presented it with such carelessness that it dropped on the floor. While it was being retrieved he retired to his own room without a word, and closed the door against all comers. He flung himself into his chair, torn again by conflicting emotions. At one moment he was angry at having been driven into a course against which he revolted; at another he was relieved that the strain of the conflict with his father was over. He blamed Yasin for weakness and Nissa for her defection. Even Mrs. Barstow was not absolved from criticism. She might have helped him in his distress. He had fought his battle single-handed, and his father was the victor. What an iron will the Nawab possessed! It was this dominant spirit which

had animated his ancestors and brought them victory, as they overran the rich plains and plateaux of Southern India. At the bottom of his heart he admired the sire to whom in duty and in filial love he had submitted; but he was none the less restless under defeat. From his father his thoughts went to Nissa. Why, oh! why could she not have come to him? What was her love worth? It was as weak and unstable as the wind. Could it be that she was taking her revenge and paying him back in his own coin? And Yasin! What was he thinking of, the poor-spirited boy! in allowing his brother to rob him of his bride? Their feebleness rankled in his mind, and again he was tempted to rail at their sheep-like docility.

How spiritless they all were, walking down the beaten road of their ancestors, like so many trained horses bridled with blinkers, never looking to the right or left for something better, something that would raise them above the level of brute beasts.

Yusuf his servant approached and announced that dinner was ready. He rose, took off the black satin coat and the jewelled turban and put on a silk dressing-gown. The dinner consisted of six or seven courses, and was cooked and served in a manner that would have satisfied the most fastidious European. Hassan had no appetite, however, and before the last course appeared he had left the table and was walking restlessly up and down the room. Again he looked at his watch with the hunted expression of a man who wanted to escape, but could not find the way. It was too late now to think of anything of the kind. He had to remind himself that he had tendered his submission and given his word to his father. Though he might feel the utmost repugnance to fulfilling it, that word could not now be broken. He was in honour bound to carry out his engagement and must put aside all thought of evading his fate. Better pluck up courage and face the trouble; for the sake of peace it was best to get it over and have done with it as soon as possible.

Yusuf brought the customary cup of coffee, and was directed to put it on a table in the sitting-room whither Hassan followed. The man drew up a favourite chair that his master often occupied and then stood silently waiting for orders.

"I shall not want you ; you can go," Hassan said.

"Huzoor, you have eaten nothing. Shall I bring biscuits and a syphon ?"

"No ; I shan't want them."

The servants cleared away the dinner swiftly and quietly, switched off the electric light in the dining-room and departed. The door was closed behind them, and the young Shahzada was left for the night.

Usually the evening passed quickly. There was a short time for reading during the smoking of the cigarette and the drinking of the coffee. A letter or two might perhaps require to be written. Then came his visit to his mother, which before Nissa's disappearance lasted fully an hour.

To-night the Begum would not expect him. It would be contrary to tradition, that tyrant of the East, to appear in the family. His place was the bridal chamber to which his bride would be conducted at nine o'clock.

He took up a book, an English work of recent travel and sport in Tibet ; but it was impossible to concentrate his attention on the sentences. His eye passed over them again and again without conveying their meaning to his preoccupied brain. He threw the book down and switched off the light. Then he went into the verandah.

It was a still evening, cool but no longer chilly. The wind had died down, and the scent of the Persian roses and double jasmine came up from the hareem garden and filled the air with sweetness. Far in the distance he could hear the roll of the tomtom, betokening the celebration of another wedding. An unseen bride was being married to an unknown man, as he had been married to Nissa, and as he had that day been

married to Huleema. On the other side he heard the shrill whistle of an engine shunting carriages at the station ; a strange mingling of the East and the West.

His mind went back to that fatal night five months ago when he had waited with a burning impatience for the hour to strike, listening and longing for the sound of the clock in his room. He almost smiled as he compared that moment with the present. Now anger took the place of ardent anticipation and disinclination the place of longing.

"Darkness and light ; day and night ! never shall the two meet and mingle," said the faqir of the black panther. The man was a fraud. He had promised light after patience ; but the light had not come. He had been plunged into greater darkness than ever.

"Ting !" went the bell of his travelling clock. He started and counted each stroke until he came to nine.

He went back to the sitting-room and listened. There was no sound in the rooms beyond his. Had his bride come ? He thought he heard the creak of the door leading into the passage to the hareem. It was being closed upon the retreating steps of the women who had brought Huleema. She would be drugged after the custom of the hareem ; the thought was unendurable.

He sank down into his easy-chair, and relapsed into dreams of the past when the world had a very different aspect for him from what it had now. The child Nissa, his own schooldays, his college life, and his friendships with English boys and men, some of whom like Derwent he had seen happily married to women they had chosen for themselves. He was at Ranelagh again, playing polo ; at Epsom, watching the noble struggle of strength on the course, on the moors in Scotland, in Norway fishing, in London and Paris among the butterflies of fashion.

"Ting ! ting ! ting !"

Again he counted although he knew that neither he nor his clock were mistaken. It was ten.

With a heavy sigh he rose and went to his dressing-room. A quarter of an hour later he stood at the door of his second wife's room. The fingers that closed round the handle trembled, and once again an insane impulse seized him to fly from the house, and break the cords that bound him to his fate. It was like a sudden nausea. He paused while he conquered it with an effort of will.

Turning the handle he entered.

The electric lights were full on and the dressing-table with its reflecting looking-glasses and brilliant ornaments glittered in the flood of illumination. A figure stood where Nissa had stood, tall, willowy, beautiful.

She heard the sound of his footsteps and turned towards him, stretching out her arms with radiant happiness. Then with a rush she came straight towards him, her eyes shining with love, her curved lips parted in the lines of a bird in flight, as she smiled in her joy.

"Husband! husband! don't you know me? It is Nissa! My eyes have come back! Allah be praised for His goodness! I see thee at last, beloved! My sun! my moon! I love thee! I love thee! I love thee!"

Warm arms were round his neck; eager lips pressed to his. It was Nissa in truth, with sight restored, who rested in his embrace, no longer fearing to look up into his eyes, no longer downcast with a deadly sorrow and despair that she thought was to last her life; the Nissa of his dreams, who had at last flown to him like the child of old, but with the added confidence of a woman's love, with the very words on her lips he longed to hear.

Darkness and light! Day and night! The darkness had flown and light, blessed light, had come to the faithful follower of the Prophet, bringing earthly bliss in its train.

* * * * *

"Now tell me how this miracle was worked," said Hassan as they sat together on the following morning

in the verandah overlooking the garden of sweet odours below.

Nissa was trying her hand for the first time at pouring out the early morning coffee for her husband.

"It was all through Mrs. Barstow. She brought an English lady doctor to see me; and when I heard to my great joy that perhaps my sight might be restored, I fainted. I went to the lady's house and was shut up in a dark room. She gave me something to breathe that took away my senses and, then she must have put medicine into my eyes. When I awoke they were bandaged. Mrs. Barstow was with me all the time though it was her holiday, and she helped me to bear the pain. Gradually the light was let in; and to my great joy I found that my sight had come back. Have I poured out your coffee as you like it, my beloved?"

"Why wasn't I told? Yes, my pearl, it is the best coffee I have ever tasted. You should have told me all about it. I shall scold Mrs. Barstow for keeping me in ignorance. It was cruel of you all."

"Ah! no! At first we could not tell if the cure would be complete. Also you were away on your shooting expedition. It was your father's wish that I should come to you as a surprise. He wanted to see whether you would obey him. I was told of your reply, that you refused to take another wife without my consent; and I promised to send the answer you received by Mrs. Barstow. Husband! will you ever forgive me for the pain I caused you?"

He caught her hand and pressed it to his lips.

"Light of my heart! we passed through the dark shadows together. Will you ever forgive me for my cruel rejection? Here comes my mother. We must go and greet her."

Hand in hand they went to meet the Begum, who was followed by the Shahzada himself. The mother's eyes shone with happy tears as she kissed them both; and the voice of the old Nawab trembled as he pronounced the salaam.

Later in the day Yasin came beaming with delight to tell them that the Nawab had consented to have his marriage with Huleema Bee performed in three weeks' time. So full was he of his own happiness that he quite forgot to congratulate his brother. Fazeela made up for his omission by her felicitations, which she poured out on every possible occasion.

"I knew everything was coming right, and that Nissa would get well. No sooner did we hear that the operation was successfully over, than good omens began to appear, and all the bad disappeared."

Yasin deliberately winked at his brother.

"They began in good earnest," he said impudently, "as soon as your proposed marriage to Huleema was given up, and it was decided to let you have Nissa."

"Little brother! it is high time you had a wife, and I hope you will be as happy as I am," responded Hassan warmly.

THE END



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